BUILDING A VEGAN COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: AN OUTREACH ANALYSIS FOR VEGAN SOCIETY OF PEACE, HOUSTON, TEXAS

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This research is focused on a group of vegan and vegan-curious individuals who are creating, building and maintaining a vegan community of practice in Houston, Texas. Through ethnographic methods, including participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, surveys, quantitative analysis, and use of geographic information systems (GIS), this thesis considers motivations, group hierarchies, core and peripheral membership, practices, beliefs and construction of identity within the vegan community of practice. Further, concepts from the anthropology of religion are utilized in discourse analysis around conversion to ethical veganism, preaching, and religious-ethical beliefs around enlightenment and the principle of ahimsa. Utilizing subcultural studies and social movement theory, this thesis also shows how the vegan community of practice fits into vegan subcultures and the greater vegan lifestyle movement. Finally, as an applied project, deliverables to the client Vegan Society of PEACE includes both personal and structural barriers to veganism which are understood with respect to a race-conscious approach to veganism, and with special consideration given to the capitalist commodification of animals. Suggestions are given and strategies for growth of the community are highlighted at the end of this paper.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank the members of the Board of Directors of Vegan Society of PEACE for giving me this opportunity to do research with participants of this group. Special thanks to my site sponsor Dr. Alan Clune; Founders Kristen Lee Ohanyan and Tosh Schurz; and Anuj Shah, my first contact with this group and the current President of the Board of Directors of VSOP.

Special gratitude goes to the research participants, especially those I was privileged to spend time with during interviews and conducting surveys. I have learned so much from them about veganism and what it means to go vegan for the animals, for health, and for the environment. As well, I am grateful to all the people and animals I met along the way at the potlucks and other events, and so many helpful and interesting folk – vegans, vegan-curious, and non-vegans alike.

I am also grateful to my thesis committee chair Dr. Andrew Nelson for his guidance, encouragement, and support; as well as my committee co-chair Dr. Courtney Cecale, who introduced me to community of practice theory; committee member Dr. Adam Dunstan, who acted as chair of my committee before his move to Alaska, and for his guidance through the IRB process, field work and analysis; and committee member from Geography Dr. Chetan Tiwari.

Finally, I wish to express my love and indebtedness to my late father John McRae. Thank you for this farm and thank you for showing me how to love all animals, great and small. This thesis is dedicated to all the animals who have gone before us, all those who are still here with us, the special needs animals, and all the animals living in factory farms, cages, and labs. I hope to help create a better way.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Vegan Outreach and the Vegan-Curious Newcomer

Ethical veganism, or going vegan "for the animals," for health, and for the environment, is a growing trend in the United States which may be understood in terms of a vegan subculture, especially in urban areas and across online social media platforms, as well as a greater vegan lifestyle movement. As such, vegan outreach groups promoting animal advocacy and other aspects of veganism in the US have begun to flourish in the last two decades, bringing in vegan-curious newcomers from all walks of life. This research focuses on the ways in which a group of vegans and vegan-curious newcomers in the greater Houston area are building community, taking into account ethical and religious discourse around conversion, barriers to veganism which include access and ideas of vegan privilege and whiteness, and the role of the greater political economy of factory farming, which includes the capitalist commodification of animals.

The Vegan Society of PEACE (hereafter also known as VSOP) based in Houston, Texas, was founded in 2004 by President Kristen Lee Ohanyan and Co-Founder and Vice President Tosh Schurz, her husband, after they attended an animal rights convention in Washington D.C. Their primary focus is working to abolish the current factory farming system by actively promoting ethical vegan living, animal rights advocacy, environmental responsibility (including climate change awareness), peace, compassion and *ahimsa*, or nonviolence towards all animals and humans. While their primarily focus is "for the animals," values associated with veganism are extended to other social justice arenas, such as standing in solidarity with the #StopAsianHate movement. As well, in the course of my field work with VSOP, I encountered people from many racial, ethnic, class and national backgrounds who participate in the group,

which added to my understanding of community-building as well as challenges for VSOP in diverse outreach.

While VSOP believes all sentient beings deserve to live, it recognizes that the world we live in often alienates vegans and creates barriers to a vegan way of life. VSOP acts in many ways as a support group for the vegan-curious newcomer, hosting "Second Saturdays" vegan potlucks every month. As well, volunteer opportunities abound for other events, ranging from localized bakes sales, tabling and leafletting at schools and other venues, volunteer socials, film screenings, meetups (dinner and presentations) at local all-vegan restaurants, support of local vegan food trucks and chefs and other vegan vendors, to the "VSOP Texas Go Vegan Week" campaign, the annual Vegan Thanks-Living, the "Walk for Animals, Walk for Peace" event held at Hermann Park, Earth Day, and VegFest Houston events. Long-time vegans (vegan for more than ten years) as well as vegetarians participate in the monthly potlucks and other events, sometimes bringing omnivores to try the vegan dishes and listen to vegan speakers, who often begin their presentations with a testimonial of their conversion to veganism.

One may query, what is a vegan? One well-known definition is as follows:

> Veganism is a philosophy and a way of living which seeks to exclude – as far as is possible and practicable – all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefits of animals, humans and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals (The Vegan Society 2021).

Further, one may ask, how does this research further anthropological interest in veganism, and what arguments can be constructed to shed light on the ways in which Vegan Society of PEACE is creating, building, and maintaining a community in Houston, Texas?

I argue that despite barriers to going vegan in Houston which include social exclusion and issues of access and availability, as well as structural elements related to ideas of vegan

privilege and whiteness coupled with a political economy around the capitalist commodification of animals, VSOP is subverting social and cultural norms through the enactment of a vegan community of practice in their contribution to a vegan subculture and greater lifestyle movement in the Greater Houston region of Texas. Further, I posit that ethical veganism understood in terms of religious discourse around conversion is a crucial and integral component of this community of practice. Finally, my findings show that VSOP is both challenged by and challenging racist and privileged norms around the whiteness of veganism, and this awareness further strengthens its approach to outreach, education and advocacy, making veganism more approachable for all races, ethnicities, income levels, and ages. As participant Gaia (female, 40's, Black, vegan, newcomer) stated: "Veganism is not just for rich white people, it's for every single body" (Gaia, Interview 2018). The main research question seeks to address these arguments, contentions and findings as follows: How are vegans and vegan-curious newcomers in Houston creating, building, and maintaining a community of practice which contributes to vegan subcultures and the greater lifestyle movement?

1.2 Development of the Project

Vegan-curious participants in Houston, which include those who identify as vegan but seek community and support through VSOP events and outreach, are an excellent source of data collection. When I first approached VSOP's then-President Kristen, she indicated that one of their hopes resided in "getting the vegan message out there," especially around VSOP's larger aim of combating the current factory farming system on behalf of the animals. I have also come to understand the need for identifying patterns and themes which help me to formulate a model of inquiry based on anthropological theories. In order to formulate the main research question, I am aware that initially the smaller, embedded questions must be answered, as "figuring out what

a research design entails necessitates elaborating a single, very complex question into its less complex components" (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 137).

As I reflect upon the development of the project upon which this thesis is built, I recognize its nascent ideological form in personal experiences around animal ethics which go back decades of my life. When I began exploratory research in 2017, I had my own ideas of what veganism might look like in Houston. I had spent time reading, researching the internet, speaking to vegans around campus and drawing upon my own experiences trying vegan and vegetarian options in life. As I developed my project and obtained a client, I narrowed my ideas to understanding what a vegan subculture in Houston looks like. As I engaged in field work – participant observation at events, interviews and conducting surveys - I drew upon my interview guide to formulate the beginning research questions, which focused on motivations for becoming vegan, as well as practices, beliefs, attitudes, ideas, and emotions around the shift in perspective around animals, health and the environment which leads to consideration of the vegan way of life. I also inquired about the barriers to participation in the vegan way of life, which would help me in my deliverables to the client VSOP.

As I take a step back, adjusting the lens of inquiry, what does a vegan subculture look like in Houston in light of recent vegan trends in American society? Is there a sense of solidarity, or is veganism more of a personal journey? In order to answer these questions, I found myself in need of guidance, which I received from Anuj Shah, the current President and Board of Director member of VSOP at one of the early "Whole Foods after-party mixers" events, which occurs after the monthly potlucks when the weather is nice. Anuj suggested that I look at the "Second Saturdays" potluck event as a starting point. Anuj asked, "Why are there so many newcomers in attendance each month at the Second Saturdays potluck event hosted by VSOP, yet they do not

return?" It had become clear to me, as we conversed, that there are a relatively large number of vegan-curious newcomers each month. Sometimes a regular will bring a newcomer, and the newcomer brings their family, including children. The newcomer may initially be interested, for health reasons, or she/he may have seen a documentary about animal exploitation in factory farming. Whatever the reason, the newcomer is very important to VSOP, and the hope is that the newcomer will continue to attend the monthly potlucks and other events, even getting involved in community activities such as volunteering for VSOP events. I witnessed this on occasion, but as Anuj pointed out, for the most part the newcomers *do not* return. This leads to a static population of "regulars" and "occasional visitors," limiting the growth of the organization and pointing to the possibility for outreach re-evaluation. Or does it? Can improvements be made in the structure of the potluck event, and how can applied anthropology assist in this matter? Of great importance is the realization that just because someone does not return to the potluck event does not mean that they did not adopt a more vegan lifestyle, as there are as many *reasons* as newcomers. Also, this line of inquiry has nothing to do with their commitment to animals or their understanding of ethical issues surrounding human-animal relationships. However, there may exist *systemic and structural barriers* which are not related to the client VSOP and warrant applied anthropological investigation. In other words, how does VSOP fit in with the greater vegan lifestyle movement happening in Houston and across other urban areas, and what factors contribute to a broader sociocultural aversion to veganism?

It is important to note that in recent years, VSOP outreach has become digitized and dependent on social media platforms. The importance of social media to this group cannot be overstated. The VSOP Facebook page is a popular resource for vegans and veganism in the Houston area and beyond. At the time of this writing, 5,996 people follow this page. Regarding

the future path of the monthly potlucks and outreach, VSOP adapted to the challenges when COVID-19 arrived in March of 2020. VSOP continued providing virtual support for vegans and vegan-curious individuals via their Facebook pages, supporting local vegan restaurants for take-out and delivery, businesses, and even animal shelters; disseminating information around safety, quarantine and health; and bringing awareness to food insecurity during the pandemic. With the rise of the Zoom platform, the virtual potluck was born in July 2020, so that vegans and vegan-curious alike could share their vegan "quarantine creations." Only ten of us attended the October 2020 virtual potluck, where the theme was Hispanic vegan food, and Anuj invited us to share our vegan dinner creations, or other vegan ideas, as well as our "vegan origin stories." As the world re-opens again, I will be interested to see how VSOP continues to adapt to the environment vis-à-vis "a new normal."

1.3 Houston as a Research Site

Houston is an interesting field research site, as vegans make up a relatively small percentage of the population in the heartland of historical cattle country, which is also home to the annual Houston Rodeo and Livestock Show. The Greater Houston area is also an urban-rural sprawl which is culturally known for its barbecue joints, steak houses, and seafood. As I engaged in ethnography, or telling the stories of vegans in Houston, I discovered what participants referred to as "Vegan Houston," a space for the dynamic interplay between food, multiculturalism, and animal ethics, home to a great movement of vegan advocacy and awareness within a diverse urban/rural geographical interplay. Houston, as the largest metropolis in Texas, represents a large sample population of non-vegans, vegan-curious and vegan people, which is appropriate for addressing the question around why participants in the potlucks commute sometimes long-distances to meet in one central location in downtown Houston, the

Houston Community college building at Travis and Main. As well, I am interested in Houston's amazing racial/ethnic diversity and multicultural aspects, especially the Black communities of the Third Ward; South Asian, East Asian and Hispanic communities, also referred to as "ethnic enclaves"; and individuals from these communities as they relate to vegan foods and businesses. Further, diverse cultural heritages around adapting non-vegan lifeways and food-ways to vegan ways is intriguing, as well as the various religious implications which may intersect with cultural heritage, such as Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Catholic, and Southern Baptist. I also wondered how the ethnic diversity and multiculturalism of Houston would relate to ideas of vegan privilege and whiteness, as well as the role of one's religious upbringing on commitment to veganism.

I was also drawn to Houston's history around animals, going back to the 19th century, as this would help me to understand local norms around animal commodification. Mules and horses were an integral part of the work force in nascent, pre-industrial Houston. Cattle and the meat industry, the coastal fishing industry and local production of eggs, milk and other animal products fueled the rise in human population. Historic entertainment included hunting of deer and birds, gulf fishing and crabbing, and the rodeo, which featured calf roping, bull riding and sheep wrangling. As well, the local cultures viewed cattle, pigs, chickens and other "meat animals" as food. The restaurant "scene" in the 20th century developed into stereotypical barbecue joints, steak houses and fried chicken establishments, as well as Cajun food around bayou creatures such as crayfish and alligators (Greater Houston Partnership 2021).

It is also important to situate non-vegan Houston in history, as this context provides further understanding for my motivation to choose this area as a field site for this project. From its early beginnings as a mosquito-ridden, struggling trading post, founded in 1836, Houston transformed into a successful shipping port and railroad hub for the manufacturing and export of

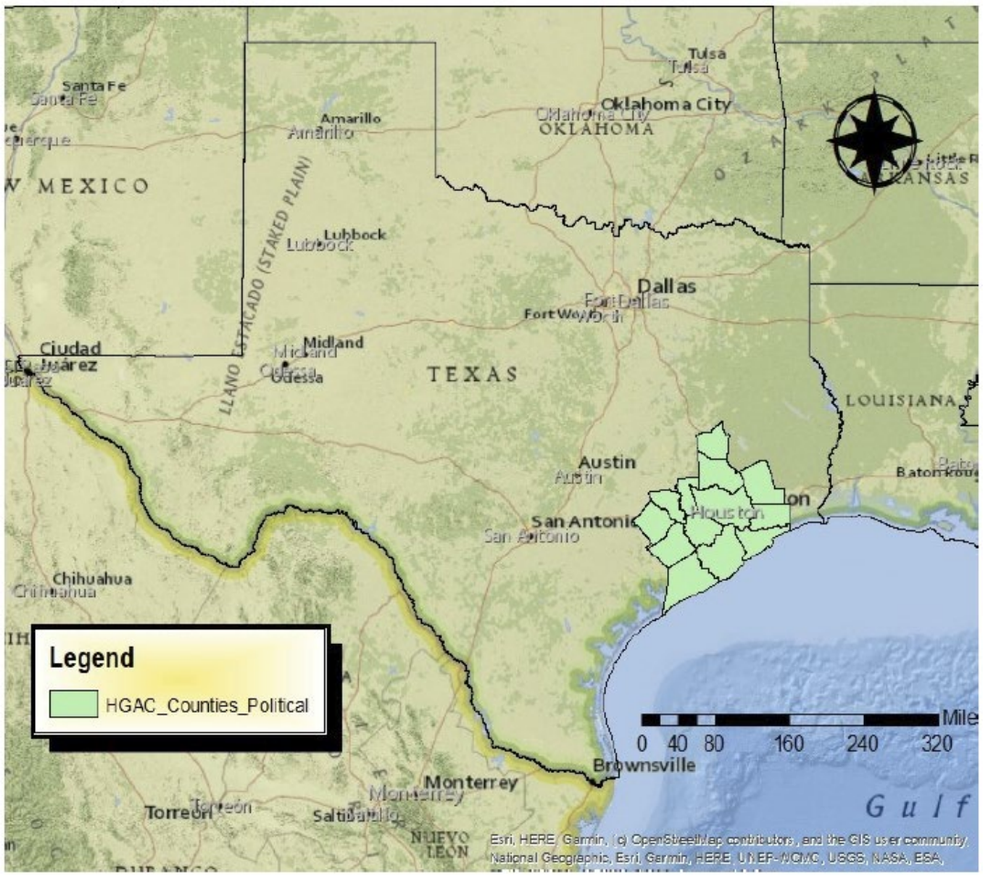
cotton, grains (rice) and lumber by the early 20th century. The first Houston Fat Stock and Rodeo (now the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo) was held in 1932, and by the 1940's the beginning of the Texas Medical Center established the Houston as the most important city in Texas for health care. In the 1970's and 1980's energy dominated the local economy, as corporations such as Shell Oil moved their headquarters to Houston; however, the late 1980's recession prompted diversification of the local economy. The 1990's were characterized by further growth of the city, population and diversity (Greater Houston Partnership 2021). I am particularly interested in this idea of diversification of local economy as it relates to neoliberalism, as this is an important facet of capitalist commodification of animals in the normative non-vegan food system.

1.3.1 Geography

The geography of the field site is an important component of this project, as both interview and survey participants resided in diverse parts of Greater Houston, which had an impact on issues around access to the vegan way of life. Regarding regional geography, Greater Houston, or the Houston -The Woodlands - Sugar Land Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) consists of nine counties defined by the Office of Management and Budget, spanning 9,444 square miles, the largest MSA in Texas (Greater Houston Partnership 2021). The Houston-Galveston Area Council includes thirteen counties, from which a dataset was utilized in the creation of the following maps (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2).

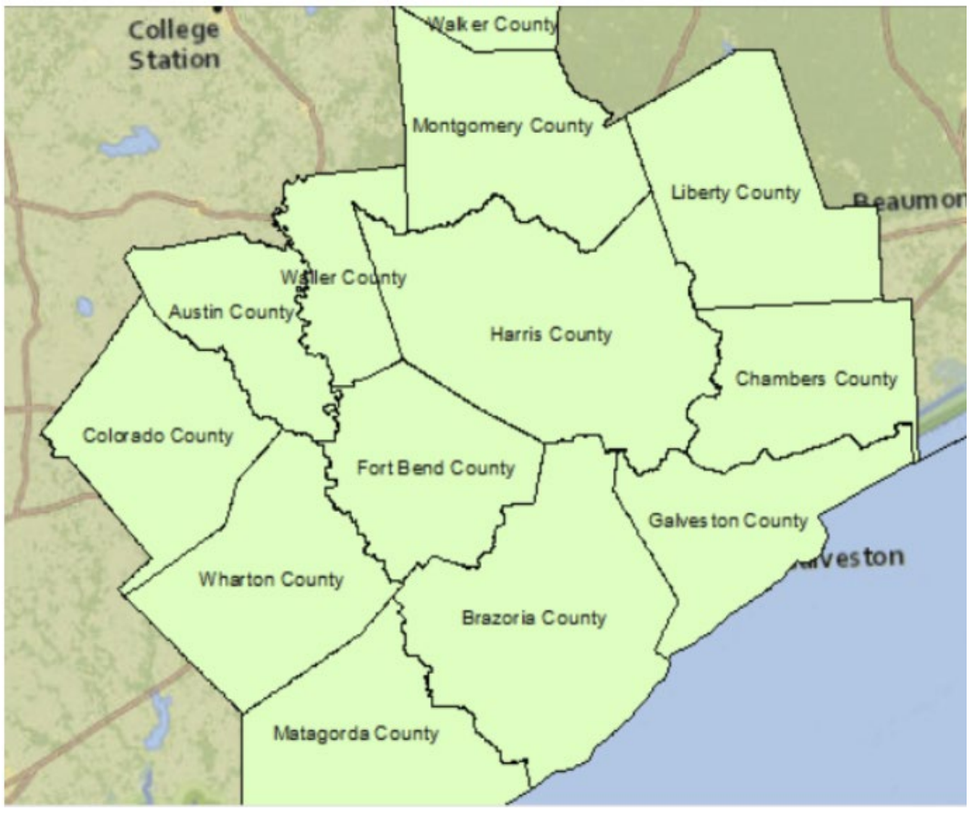
Note the sheer enormity of the region, which comprises nearly 12.500 square miles. Most of my data collection occurred in Harris County, which has a population of more than 2.3 million humans, but I attended events and conducted interviews to the south in Fort Bend and Brazoria Counties and as far north as Montgomery County.

Figure 1.1: Map showing 13 counties of Greater Houston serviced by the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC 2021).



Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community, National Geographic, UNEF-WCMC, USGS, NASA, ESA, METI, NRCAN, GEBCO, NOAA, INCREMENT P Corp.

Figure 1.2: Detail of the 13 metropolitan counties of Greater Houston (H-GAC 2021), the fifth most populous metropolitan statistical area in the US.



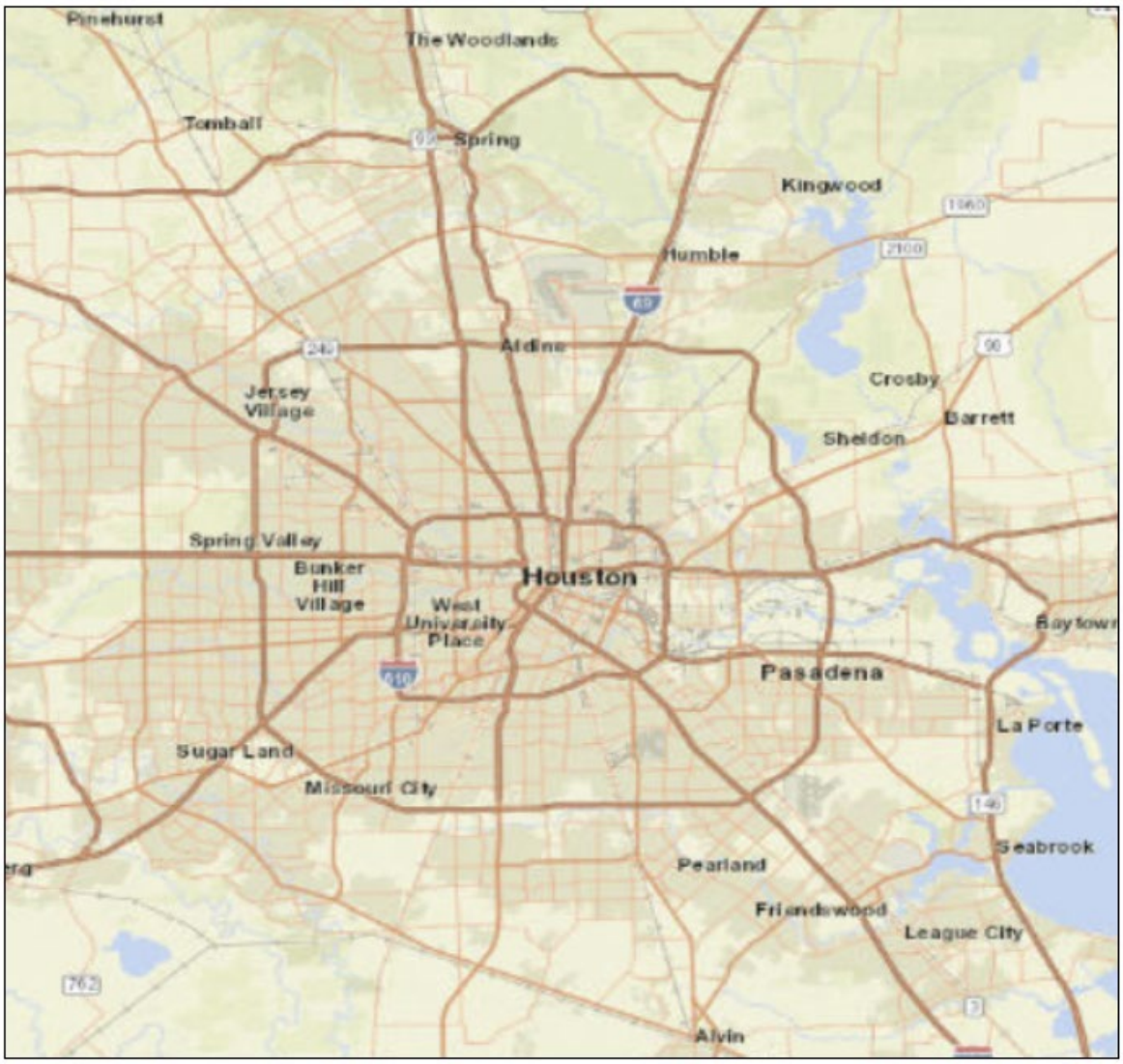
Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community, National Geographic, UNEF-WCMC, USGS, NASA, ESA, METI, NRCAN, GEBCO, NOAA, INCREMENT P Corp.

I also met vegan-curious participants along the way from many of the contiguous counties. Further, I found that vegan and vegan-curious individuals travelled long distances from these surrounding counties to attend both VegFest Houston events located in the central part of Harris County as well as the monthly potlucks, also located in the downtown area. Further, as my findings show, food deserts are an important consideration for barriers to veganism, and several of the surrounding counties, especially to the northeast, east and south, had a higher prevalence of low-income low-access areas worthy of further exploration.

Regarding the structure of the metropolis, is important to this study as it relates to ideas of vegan privilege and access to the vegan way of life, as well as ideas of race and ethnicity as they relate to vegan identity. Greater Houston is arranged in several concentric circles, with Downtown and several upscale, wealthy neighborhoods comprising the center, the so called "inner-loop communities" including River Oaks, Montrose and the Museum District closest to downtown. These areas abound with vegan-friendly and even all-vegan establishments which cater to the mostly white economically stable residents of these areas. To the northwest is the Heights, to the west, Memorial and Memorial Park, to the southwest West University Place, Rice University and Hermann Park near the Texas Medical Center. These areas are largely white and privileged areas of Houston as well, which bodes well for veganism but has aspects of exclusion to other races and ethnicities. To the south and southeast are "Eado" (East of Downtown), the Third Ward, Emancipation Park, and the area around the University of Houston, which are all historically Black neighborhoods. On a visit to Crumbville, a vegan-friendly Black-owned bakery located in the Third Ward/Emancipation Park area, I also took note that one of the vegan food trucks, Houston Sauce Co., also Black-owned, was parked right near this area, which showed me the relationship of location, race and access to vegan foods. As well, many of the

cities and neighborhoods shown in the following map comprised places of residence, interview locations, and event locations (Fig. 1.3).

Figure 1.3: Map of Houston showing the loops, outer communities and structure of the metropolis.



Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, USGS, Intermap, INCREMENT P Corp., NRCan, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), Esri Korea, Esri (Thailand), NGCC, OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community, GEBCO, FAO, NPS, NRCAN, GeoBase, IGN, Kadaster NL, Ordinance Survey, METI.

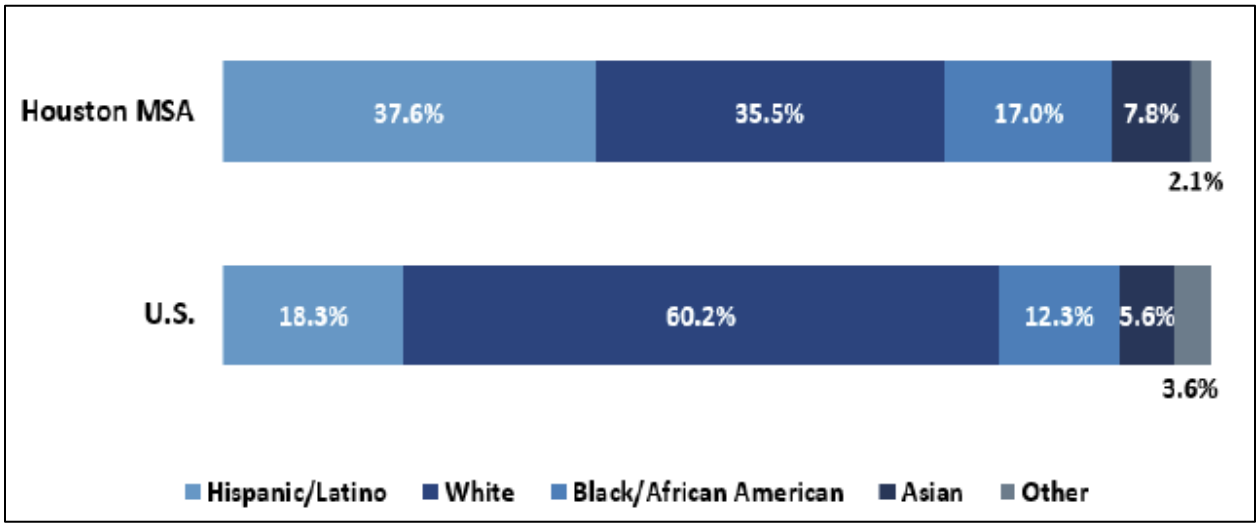
Further, towards the border of the first concentric region, Loop 610, and to the southwest, are several ethnic enclaves including Little India and Chinatown in the Bellaire region. These areas a very important for veganism on Houston, as vegetarian restaurants with vegan-options are plentiful in these areas of town. Outside Loop 610 and near the second Loop 8 are Aldine to

the north and Jersey Village to the northwest, which are increasingly less prone to veganism, according to participants who reside in these areas. Outside of Loop 8 and to the north is the Woodlands, where a raw vegan potluck is highlighted by several participants, and further to the north Huntsville and Sam Houston State University, which according to some participants become increasingly rural and less vegan-friendly, in light of broader urban/rural vegan trends. To the far west is Katy, which is considered a "wealthy white suburb" by some participants. I also noticed a trend in all-vegan establishments as I travelled west of Houston. To the southwest of downtown is Stafford, where the VegFest Houston was held in 2018, and further Sugar Land, which is also considered a white suburb and not vegan-friendly. Finally, to the southeast is Pearland, another suburb which one newcomer participant did not view as vegan-friendly; to the further south is Alvin and Angleton, which are seen as rural, conservative and white by participants, as well as not-friendly to veganism; and to the southeast is Galveston and the Gulf of Mexico, which is largely characterized by fresh seafood, multiple races and ethnicities, and not particularly vegan-friendly.

1.3.2 Demographics

I am interested in statistical research involving race and ethnicity as well as population density, as this supports my exploratory findings of racial and ethnic diversity as well as a large sample population for further research on veganism in the Greater Houston Area. Notably, the 2000 census found the Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) had no racial or ethnic majority (Greater Houston Partnership 2021). Metro Houston's Hispanic/Latino population grew larger than the non-Hispanic White population for the first time in 2017. One in four Houstonians was born outside the US, with 61.1% originating in Latin American and 27.1% in Asian countries (US Census Bureau 2021).

Figure 1.4: Distribution of population by race/ethnicity in Houston and US, 2018.



Source: US Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey

Population estimates for the Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land MSA in 2020 rank it as the third most residents among all metros in the US and fifth most populous overall, with 7,180,760 residents. The city of Houston, Texas population 2020 rests at 2,340,890, with an 11.50% growth rate since 2010. This makes Houston the fourth most populous city in the US, and the first most populous in Texas.

1.3.3 Vegan Houston

I am also interested in the idea of "Vegan Houston," which is a term I heard often during my exploratory research and participant observation. I wondered how this idea fit with ideas of veganism as a subculture in Houston as well as veganism as a lifestyle movement in Greater Houston, the rest of Texas, and beyond. From my observations and discussions with Board members and participants, "Vegan Houston" has an ephemeral history built by individuals who struggled quietly against the non-vegan system in which they were raised in. One of the regulars recalled attending Houston Vegetarian Society meetings when he was commuting from Beaumont to Houston in the 1970's, as there were no vegan restaurants in 1975. He had been to

Vietnam, so he knew to visit local Buddhist temples for vegan food (Observation, October 2020 virtual potluck). Anuj described going vegan in the 1980's in Houston, "deep in the heart of Texas" as a challenge: "hunting, fishing, manly, big and burly" (Exploratory Research 2018). As I came to better understand the gendered implications of veganism and manliness, I understood these words in a new light. Alan, my site sponsor, moved to Houston from Huntsville in 2004 and became vegan in 2005; he recalls finding "mock meats" at Walmart and finding vegan meetups on meetup.com, "to find people like me." The founding of VSOP in 2004, he states, "was a great thing for vegans and Houston, helped bring people into the fold" (Alan, October 2020 virtual potluck). Rachael recalls that when she went vegan in 2011, VSOP was the only vegan group in Houston (Rachael, Interview 2018).

In the last decade, veganism and the ease of being vegan in Houston has improved dramatically. According to a WalletHub survey, in 2017 Houston was named one of the best and economical places for vegans to live, ranked number 17 out of 100 US cities. Criteria included highest percentage of restaurants serving vegan or vegetarian options, farmers markets and community-supported agriculture per capita, local access to vegetarian food production, vegetable nurseries per capita, number of juice/smoothie bars, and affordability. Diversity was cited as important to Houston's ranking (Watson 19 October.2017). In the same survey conducted by WalletHub in 2018, Houston was ranked at number 19, with affordability scoring highest as compared to 100 other American cities (13th); diversity, accessibility, and quality scoring 51st; and vegetarian lifestyle 26th. Other Texas cities which also made the top 50: Plano (49th), Dallas (26th), and Austin (7th) (Azari and Hines 29 October.2018). Houston once again was ranked at number 19 in 2019 but fell to 42nd overall in 2020. Affordability remained high at 13th; diversity, accessibility and quality fell to 57th, and vegetarian lifestyle fell to 78th.

Several other Texas cities made the top 100 list, including Austin (10th), Irving (14th), Lubbock (19th), Plano (23rd) and Dallas (33rd) (McCann 28 September.2020). I am interested in this phenomenon of Texas cities as vegan/vegetarian-friendly geographies, long known for meat-centric cuisine, as a subversion of normalcy related to the vegan subculture. I am also interested in Houston's drop from 17th to 42nd in the WalletHub ranking in 2020, wondering which factors caused this drop and if they were related to sociocultural or structural barriers, or collective/personal circumstances. Further, as I formulated my research questions for this project, I kept in mind space as place according to local political economies, urban and rural issues, and ideas around affordability and accessibility, especially with respect to lower-income areas of Houston and considerations of race and ethnicity. Comparisons to other cities in Texas regarding veganism and the vegan lifeway as well as vegan-curious interest in veganism also played a contextual role in the formulation of research questions.

I also considered the role of religion, health, education and youth groups in this exploration of veganism in the city, as each of these cultural domains is also important in supporting ideas of community-building around veganism, as well as subcultural affiliations. The Jain Center of Houston (Jain Society of Houston 2021) and International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) are places of worship which espouse *ahimsa* and vegetarian/vegan diet and lifeways. Further, participants often referred to ISKON as home to Govinda's restaurant, a lacto-vegetarian establishment open to the public, serving all-vegan cuisine on certain days (ISKON of Houston 2021). In the establishment of space as place, The Texas Medical Center, touted as the largest medical city in the world (TMC Texas Medical Center 2021), plays a significant role in the normalization of veganism as a healthy alternative to meat-eating, even a preventative measure to curb lifestyle - related diseases and conditions. As well, the creation of a

"vegan scene" through social media as well as vegan "hangouts" is made possible through numerous college and university groups, such as Rice University Vegan Society (Rice University Sustainability 2021), as well as making vegan options more available on campuses like University of Houston (Rose 14 November.2019), and the Black-owned Lindiana's Southern Vegan Kitchen food truck permanently parked across from Texas Southern University on Wheeler Street (Everett 3 March.2020).

Finally, I considered the role of animal organizations and sanctuaries in the creation of vegan space as place in both urban and rural areas of Greater Houston, as this further relates to going vegan "for the animals" and the meanings of animals associated with *ahimsa*. Rowdy Girl Sanctuary, located in Angleton (Brazoria County, recently re-located to Waelder in Gonzalez County), is a sanctuary space for numerous rescued farm animals. They maintain a booth at Houston VegFest and other events, also regularly hosting volunteer days and rallies. Further, I visited the Chicken Rescue located in Alvin, Texas at a volunteer day event with VSOP in October 2018, which showed me the importance for participants to physically engage with some of the animals rescued from factory farming. VSOP also supports vegan-owned shelters for dogs, including South Side Street Dogs (renamed Pet Rescue Team SafeHouse), which takes in street dogs from the Sunnyside region of south Houston outside the Loop, showing the importance for outreach to all animal-related ventures. Other shelters and rescue organizations supported by VSOP include Friends For Life dog and cat shelter located in the Heights, and the Houston SPCA, which advocates for animals across the region. As well, animal rights organizations such as Houston Animal Save (also supported by VSOP) organize vigils at local slaughterhouses and other sites in the Greater Houston area, especially regarding trucking and shipping of animals bound for slaughter (Houston Animal Save 2021).

1.4 Linking Theory to Practice

Anthropological interest in veganism is a burgeoning field of inquiry. For the purposes of this thesis, I began to narrow my field of inquiry to four main theoretical engagements: Communities of Practice (CofPs) and their relationship to subcultures and lifestyle movements; conversion discourse related to ethical veganism and concepts from the anthropology of religion and the anthropology of ethics and morality; the anthropology of food, especially ideas around vegan privilege and whiteness as structural barriers related to access to vegan foods; and the political economy of factory farming, which is characterized by the capitalist commodification of animals and vegan political consumerism. I discovered that much of the literature is engaged with sub-disciplinary, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary work, especially within the fields of cognitive anthropology and a social theory of learning (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998); sociolinguistics (Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999; Eckert 2006); language and gender studies (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 1995,1999; Eckert 2000); social movement theory (Cherry 2006, 2015) and subcultural studies (Hebdige 1979, 1999; Maffesoli 1985; Gelder 2007, 2010). Further, the anthropology of Christianity is an important sub-discipline pertaining to ethnographies within the anthropology of religion, especially around ideas of rupture (Meyer 1998; Robbins 2004, 2017, 2019; Marshall 2009). Further, the anthropology of ethics and morality (Laidlaw 2017; Mattingly and Throop 2018) is supportive of a phenomenological approach to understanding ethical veganism as it relates to ideas of conversion (Csordas 1999, 2004; Tremlett 2014). Significant to engagement with the anthropology of food are critical race feminism (Harper 2009, 2010, 2011; Polish 2016; Greenebaum 2017, 2018), and critical food geographies (Harper 2012).

It is my hope that an exploration of VSOP as a vegan community of practice will contribute to CofP literature, especially with respect to ideas from language and gender studies, as vegan identity, like gender, is socially and culturally constructed through the language of the community combined with practices. Moreover, tying the CofP in this context to subcultural studies and social movement research will provide a useful link between anthropology and sociology. As well, tying food systems to ethics through ideas, concepts and discourse from the anthropology of religion may prove to be useful to the discipline and religious studies as whole, as well as food and culture ethnographies which focus on the role of religion. Further, through the exploration of veganism as a privileged lifeway often tied to whiteness, I hope to contribute to very timely literature in anthropology around race, privilege, access to food, food deserts, gentrification and solutions to these issues which is currently being written about and circulated. While geography and space as place are a smaller part of this thesis, I still hope to contribute to ongoing dialogues between geography, urban studies and critical and human geographies literature. Finally, I place hope that my interest in animals combined with the passion I encountered by participants of VSOP, as well as the review of literature around the political economy of factory farming, capitalist commodification of animals, and political consumerism, will serve towards a greater purpose in creating a more just food system for humans and animals alike, as well as hold weight in implications for multispecies ethnography.

Because this is an applied project, I also decided that theoretical engagement is important to constructing solutions and recommendations for the client in my deliverables. In other words, how can I utilize applied anthropology to formulate potential strategies for successful community-building rooted in anthropological theory and interdisciplinary engagement? I also recognized the value of participant opinions and ideas for improvement, which I incorporated

into the deliverables. As a point of reference, there is much overlap and mutual engagement between CofPs, anthropology of religion, and the anthropology of food, which may be contextualized further within the greater political economy of factory farming as it manifests in urban and rural space made place in the Greater Houston area. I tried to bring in the sense of these overarching engagements in the deliverables, though in a much abbreviated and user-friendly format.

1.5 VSOP as a Community of Practice

Developed as the basis for a social theory of learning by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), the idea of a *community of practice* is at its most basic "a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavor." The value of the notion to sociolinguistics lies in the fact that it "identifies a social grouping not in virtue of shared abstract characteristics or simple co-presence, but in virtue of *shared practice*… [developing] ways of doing things, views, values, power relations, ways of talking" (Eckert 2006, 1). Further, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) exploration of language, gender identity and power relations, is a resource for the idea of community of practice as a vehicle for analyzing vegan identity construction and embodiment of veganism which I encountered in interviews and participant observation in this project. Finally, by connecting VSOP as a community of practice to vegan subcultures and the broader vegan social or "lifestyle" movement, I am better able to contextualize and disseminate my findings towards the greater aim of contributing to current and future literature in these fields of inquiry, as well as providing a broader context for the client in my deliverables.

1.6 Conversion Discourse and the Anthropology of Religion

Throughout my exploratory research, participant observation, and interviews, I was

aware of a common thread of religious discourse around conversion, especially in the context of testimonials, which led me to explore the notion of ethical veganism from a phenomenological standpoint. While ethical veganism is not necessarily a religious practice (though some would say otherwise), concepts from the anthropology of religion, especially the anthropology of Christianity, are useful in analyzing the connection of beliefs and practices within these testimonials. Specifically, I focused on ideas of rupture, or "breaking from the past" in terms of conversion from non-vegan lifeways to vegan lifeways as they connect to social and cultural power structures, such as Robbins' work with the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea (2004, 2017, 2019), Marshall's account of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria (2009), and Meyer's analysis of discourse in Ghanaian Pentecostal culture (1998).

The implications of this research suggested further inquiry into the importance of whether conversion discourse and the idea of rupture was supportive *enough* of ethical veganism in terms of beliefs related to practice in testimonials, and I discovered that focusing on conversion discourse *within* a community of practice was, in fact, a complex process. I also found it necessary to approach the idea with a critical eye, as anthropology requires of me, as well as from the perspective of members and participants who would question or grapple with the idea of ethical veganism in the context of religious ideas and concepts, especially those who identify as atheist, agnostic, and secular humanist. By anchoring ethical veganism to a phenomenological approach to religion (Csordas 2004, Tremlett 2014) and the anthropology of ethics and morality (Laidlaw 2017, Mattingly and Throop 2018), I am better able to isolate religious discourse around conversion in testimonials to veganism in terms that are more amenable to connecting food systems, ethics systems, and ideas around religious discourse within a vegan CofP. This also has implications for further collaboration between the anthropology of religion and other

anthropological subdisciplines such as the anthropology of food and anthropology of ethics and morality.

1.7 Deliverables and the Anthropology of Food

Deliverables for the client VSOP focus on barriers to veganism and strategies which can be implemented to bring vegan-curious newcomers back to the monthly potlucks as well as other vegan events in Houston, thus encouraging growth of the community. Important to understanding barriers to veganism are ideas from the anthropology of food, which include issues of vegan privilege, access, and the political economy of factory farming as a structural barrier.

Food is an integral part of the VSOP community of practice. At the monthly potlucks, vegan dishes are often lovingly crafted and proudly displayed, from a simple dish of sweet potatoes stewed with plantains to more elaborate concoctions, including vegan baked goods. Within the greater vegan community, a spectrum of vegan practices exists around food, from raw vegan to whole foods plant based (WFPB) to processed food vegan, a more expensive lifeway according to most participants I spoke with. Yet, from my observations many practice a combination of the above. The common denominator lies in the definition of veganism, which is the abstaining from consumption of any and all animal products. As with the anthropology of religion, I recognize the need for a critical eye in understanding veganism as it related to food. Ideas of alienation and otherness around food and food consumption practices, namely veganism, need to be understood in terms of privilege, access, race, class, sex and gender, and geographies. A useful starting point is A. Breeze Harper's work around the exclusion of black voices from the normative white "post-racial" vegan movement (2012), ideas of "racialized embodiment" (2011) and the establishment of "race-conscious veganism" through the *Sistah Vegan Project* (2009,

2010). Further work on vegan privilege and whiteness by Polish (2016) and Greenebaum (2017), and stigmas encountered by vegans of color (Greenebaum 2018), are important to understanding race and class-based barriers to veganism in Houston, especially around food deserts and gentrification (McClintock 2011).

Another key component of understanding the anthropology of food as it relates to veganism and vegan practices within the VSOP community is the connection of food and culture to the greater political economy (Wolf 1982, 1999, 2001; Heyman 2013), animal commodification (Boyd 2001; Stuart and Gunderson 2020), capitalist alienation, and Noel Castree's ideas of capitalist commodification and the "neoliberalisation of nature" within human geographies (2003, 2010). These power systems also serve as key structural barriers to going vegan. Political consumerism is tied to the greater culture of consumption and ideas of hyper-consumerism through the understanding of carnism (Joy 2020) and anti-consumerist practices of punks and "zinesters" tied to veganism (Sylvestre 2009, 2010). Finally, Wrenn (2011) argues for vegan abolitionism (the abolition of animals as property) as a site for "bottom-up, consumer-based change," with reference to vegan "consumer citizens" as an antidote to the globalization of speciesism. It is my hope that food within these numerous contexts may be seen in a different and more complex light, contributing to ongoing research and discussions around veganism. In the following chapter, I consider literature from the various sources referenced above.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview of Literature Review

This chapter is focused on the theoretical engagements which shaped the methodology of this project, analysis of findings, and discussion around my main arguments and explorations of VSOP as a community of practice (CofP). I begin with a history of the concept of community of practice (CofP), then explore the application of the term to language, gender and power relations. This serves as a sort of template for better understanding vegans and vegan-curious participants in this study as culturally, socially and linguistically constructed agents within a vegan CofP. I further develop and relate these ideas to subcultural studies and social ("lifestyle") movement theory, which creates a more holistic view of the vegan CofP. The second section of the chapter addresses ideas of religious discourse around conversion to ethical veganism and entails a review of literature from the anthropology of religion, beginning with a phenomenological approach to religion, which also considers the anthropology of ethics and morality, and the idea of rupture, specifically from the anthropology of Christianity The third section of this chapter addresses barriers to veganism, namely ideas around vegan privilege and whiteness, including the critical geography of race. The final section of this chapter looks at capitalist commodification of animals within a political economy of factory farming framework, the main motivator for ethical vegans who engage in political consumerism. These theoretical engagements serve to situate the understanding of VSOP as a CofP within larger frameworks of the anthropology of religion, anthropology of food, and political economy, which also brings clarity to methodologies and organization of findings and deliverables.

2.2 The Community of Practice (CofP)

In order to better understand VSOP as a community of practice (CofP), I looked to origins of the idea. In their publication *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Lave and Wenger (1991) developed the idea of a community of practice (CofP) as one component of a social theory of learning (Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999, 174). In their study of situated learning in the context of five unique apprenticeships, which included a study of non-drinking alcoholics, Lave and Wenger (1991, 98) defined the CofP as a "system of relationships between people, activities, and the world: developing with time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice." According to Wenger (1998, 80) there are three crucial dimensions of a CofP: 1) Mutual engagement; 2) A joint negotiated enterprise; and 3) A shared repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time.

Lave and Wenger's theory of situated cognition, which led to further work by Wenger (1998) in the establishment of "core" and "peripheral" membership in CofP's, is a crucial component of my development of a vegan model for community-building. In a critique of traditional modes of learning, Wenger (1998) focused on the idea of apprenticeship, with the belief that learning is a fundamentally social process which proceeds in natural ways. The process of joining a CofP or becoming a member involves learning, such that one performs appropriately befitting one's initial status as a "peripheral member" and later as a "core member," or one may *choose to remain peripheral*. The basis of this variation is how successfully an individual has acquired the shared repertoire [as an apprentice], assimilated the goals of the enterprise, or established patterns of engagement with other members (Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999, 176), such that "transformation of newcomers into old-timers becomes unremarkably integral to the practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991, 122). In later work, Eckert

(2006) also points to the hierarchical aspect of CofP, with a focus on the fluidity of social space and the diversity of experience found in demographic categories which imply a center and a periphery. Furthermore, the CofP is one way of focusing on what members *do*: the practice or activities that indicate that they belong to the group, and the extent to which they belong; in other words, how do the ways in which becoming a member of a CofP interact with gaining control of the discourse appropriate to it? By focusing on the *practices* of members of a vegan community of practice, even vegan-curious peripheral members as a type or sort of "apprentice" to vegan core members (regulars and Board Members), I achieve greater insight about issues of vegan identity construction through practices which carry the newcomer further into the circle, as well as barriers to veganism derived from practices.

2.2.1 Language, Gender, and Power Relations

For the purposes of this thesis, I am particularly interested in the construction of meaning and self through practices and the sociolinguistic investigations of CofP's by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992, 1995, 1999), and Eckert (2000). In *Think Practically and Look Locally: Language and Gender as Community-Based Practice* (1992), Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) began the exploration of language, gender and power relations through an ethnographic study of "jocks" and "burnouts" and salience of class relations in Detroit suburban high schools. First, their approach shifts attention away from the opposition of gender identity versus male dominance as a component of gender relations and instead looks at the "processes through which each feeds the other to produce the concrete complexities of language as used by real people engaged in social practice" (1995, 462). This approach also considers hierarchical relations across class and race, which Eckert (2006) later built upon. This mutual engagement of gender and language in a wide range of activities is a dynamic process which even has the power to

change society and institutions while remaining firmly rooted in everyday social practices and local communities.

In their findings, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) found that students coming into the school saw the institution as unchanging and institutional roles waiting to be filled, yet they viewed their participation or non-participation in the school as a creative endeavor: "Even though there have 'always been' jocks and burnouts, girls and boys, kids coming into high school are actively and mutually engaged in constituting selves within the constraints of what has, in their view, always been--and engaging with those constraints in the process" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995, 10). In other words, orientation of "jocks" *towards* the institution (higher education), including the possible rewards for ascending its hierarchical structures, is dialectically opposed to the orientation of "burnouts" towards r*esisting* the institution and its concomitant "regulative constraints" (1995, 19). The transformation of identities, understanding, and world view relates to ideas of belonging, not-belonging, alienation and otherness, which are a common thread throughout this thesis. Further, Bourdieu's work on the cultural field and the notion of the *habitus* is important to understanding belonging and not-belonging related to construction of identity (Bourdieu 1993). According to Bourdieu, the concept of the *habitus*, which consists of "corporal dispositions and cognitive templates," is designed to "capture and encapsulate" the dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity (Bourdieu 1988). *Habitus* is therefore a useful way to envision Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's vision of jocks and burnouts in relation to language, gender, and power structures.

I also found that gender constructs are particularly salient models for understanding identity construction within the vegan CofP, as they are embedded in other aspects of social life and in the construction of other socially significant aspects of identity construction, such as race,

class and ethnicity. Though not a comparison, gender constructs are a useful way to understand ways in which vegan identity construction is tied to other aspects of social life both within and outside of the vegan CofP. Further, while social categorization is not easily constructed, language is a useful tool which people use to constitute and constrain themselves and others as "kinds" of people, in terms of "which attributes, activities, and participating in social practice can be regulated" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995, 2). It should be noted that social categorization in this respect does not imply that persons within a category are harmed in any way, yet ideas of belonging and not-belonging may persist. In other words, social processes result in *labeling* which further constitutes social categories and power relations among members of a community. Labels are endowed with meaning through everyday practices, such as chatting, making observations and judgements about people, pointing people out to others, and challenging people (1995, 10). How people express affiliations with some "kinds" and reject others is an important component of understanding how CofP's manifest beyond gender constructs, as in a vegan CofP. For example, in the construction of vegan identity within the CofP, some members prefer the term "plant-based" instead of "vegan," which has different meanings across different subgroups within the greater vegan lifestyle movement. In other words, "plant-based" often refers to vegans whose main motivation focuses on health. Other examples might include meanings given to vegetarians who choose to join a vegan community of practice, negative stereotypes associated with the "vegan lifestyle movement," especially around whiteness and privilege, and the idea of "junk food veganism" as a lesser state of being vegan compared to "whole food plant-based (WFPB) veganism," which is often portrayed as a purer state of the vegan lifeway.

One can easily apply these observations around language and the social construction of

meaning to vegan studies by adjusting the context and with the realization that a CofP "inevitably involves the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence" (Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999, 174). In other words, vegan and vegan-curious newcomers to VSOP learn vegan competencies through the language of veganism, such as the understanding of what it means to celebrate a "vegan-versary," or the day when one gives up consumption of animal products. Finally, the formation of a "group identity" within the vegan CofP also leads to continual modification of common ways of speaking and belonging, providing a resource for the orientation of the community to other CofP's and larger societal structures, such as vegan subcultures, as well as social and "lifestyle" movements. It is important to address these larger societal structures in relation to the CofP by looking at *practice* as the fundamental component of the CofP, as my own focus is on the ways in which vegans are building community through practices around veganism.

2.2.2 Connecting CofPs to Subcultures and Lifestyle Movements

In connecting VSOP as a CofP to broader social movements, I chose to focus on the idea of veganism as a "lifestyle movement," which focuses less on traditional political mobilization and more on people's everyday lifestyle choices, actively promoting a lifestyle as their primary means to foster social change (Cherry 2015, citing Haenfler et al. 2012, 2). First, however, I found that it was important to address veganism as a culture, as this would assist me in understanding subcultural elements which contribute to the ideas around a vegan lifestyle. Harper (2011, 222) notes the culture of veganism is comprised of "many different subcultures and philosophies ranging from strict vegans for animal rights to dietary vegans for health to people who practice for religious spiritual reasons" (see also Cherry 2006; Iacobbo and Iacobbo 2006). As I found this to be compatible with my findings, I decided to look further into the

meaning of subculture from an anthropological perspective.

Simply stated, a subculture is a group of people with a culture or "subversion to normalcy" (Hebdige 1979) which differentiates them from the larger culture or majority to which they belong. In terms of this research, the "larger culture" refers to meat-eating or omnivore life ways which are culturally acceptable across race, ethnicity and class. Further, utilizing Gramscian notions of hegemony, conjuncture and specificity (Hebdige 1999), Hebdige asserts that subcultures are often perceived as negative due to the nature of criticism to the dominant social order, yet they bring together like-minded individuals who feel neglected by societal standards and allow them to develop a sense of identity (Hebdige 1979). Interestingly, recent studies on subcultures are focused on subversion of urban mainstream culture, especially punks, rave, goth and hip-hop, which are incidentally often tied to subversion of late capitalist corporate-bourgeoisie cultures through veganism and political consumerism, such as Maffesoli's idea of the "urban or neo-tribe" (Maffesoli 1985). Indeed, vegan practitioners as a "consumer tribe" might evince "sites of shared experiences, expressions of social distinction" (Gelder 2007, 106), not unlike members of a vegan community of practice.

Indeed, Gelder reveals a remarkable range of subcultural forms, practices and prototypes through literary, sociological and anthropological accounts of subcultures, which also inform and are informed by Gramscian ideas of hegemony and Marx's views on subculture. Further, some of Gelder's criteria for subculture may be applied to the vegan community of practice, namely an ambivalent relation to class, an association with territory rather than property, and a "refusal of the banal and massified" (Gelder 2010) or mass-produced and mass consumed. Further, it is important to distinguish between "subculture" and "movement" with respect to tying the CofP to either, yet there is a certain amount of overlap. Communities in opposition to the cultural

mainstream of consuming animals, for example, may be considered countercultural subcultures engaged in the formation of a vegan lifestyle movement, and the moments of transition from subculture to movement may be understood in terms of "locales of identification and practices of belonging" which are subject to [moral] pressure, and "social aesthetics contextualise the pursuit of wider causes" (2010, 219).

In connecting the CofP to the vegan lifestyle movement, Elizabeth Cherry's relational approach (2006) is a useful avenue of inquiry. In her study of veganism as a lifestyle movement, Cherry interviewed 24 self-identified vegans: all but two were "unaffiliated," some had subcultural affiliations with punk, some were strict vegans, and some were more lenient, allowing dairy and honey in their diets. Cherry states, "A social movement is a form of collective action based on solidarity, carrying on a conflict, and breaking the limits of the system in which action occurs (Cherry 2006, 155, citing Melucci 1984, 825). She further asserts that there are arguably more practicing vegans in the US than members of vegan organizations (2006, 156), as many vegans who might be engaged in activism or moral protest are not affiliated with vegan movement organizations, which I also found to be compatible with my findings. One can therefore consider veganism as a "larger, more diffuse movement than organizational membership alone implies" (2006, 156). This may also speak to the idea that food choices are hyper-individualistic in nature as opposed to group-oriented, which ties into neoliberal ideas around the importance of the individual in the free market economy. However, it is important to consider group affiliation when considering the CofP, as this allows for the understanding of how community practices that signal community belonging around veganism lead individuals into to the greater vegan lifestyle movement.

Regarding the relationship of social movements to political consumerism, a key practice

in the vegan CofP, Wright (2018, 2) states that while veganism does not constitute a "unified social movement," as an ideology it is marked by conscious individual actions that nonetheless stand in stark opposition to the consumer mandate of capitalism." Further, though traditional social movements define success in terms of legislative changes, veganism measures success in terms of cultural and lifestyle changes, such that vegans represent a *new form of social movement* that is not based on legislation or identity politics but instead on everyday *practices* in one's lifestyle (Cherry 2006, 157). Finally, Cherry notes that existing research, while focused on what happens to people once they are part of a lifestyle movement, lacks in explaining recruitment (Cherry 2015, 1). I would argue that seeing vegans in light of the CofP, a localized practice-oriented experience, is a useful segue into further understanding recruitment into lifestyle movements, especially in urban areas like Houston. Cherry's work with young people engaged with veganism as a lifestyle movement (Cherry 2015,2) also showed that maintenance and retention of veganism required both social support and "cultural tools that provide the skill and motivation to remain a vegan." Further, Cherry's participants also participated in punk subculture, showing the interrelated nature of lifestyle movements, subcultures and CofPs. With regards to the nature of these connections, I found a common thread in literature regarding the idea of converting to veganism as making a statement both for the animals and against the consumer mandate of capitalism, with an emphasis on leaving behind the norms of non-vegan perceptions towards animals as commodities. These ideas further lead to a shift in *belief systems* which I have chosen to explore through the lens of religious discourse.

2.3 Religious Discourse, Conversion, and the Anthropology of Religion

While there is much interesting literature around ethical veganism as a religion (Francione and Charlton 1992; Jamison et al. 2000; Hamilton 2000; Sylvestre 2009, 2010;

Johnson 2015), as a pseudo-religious practice (Berger 1992, 1999; Jamison et al. 2000; Paulson 2017), and as a quasi-religious experience (Sylvestre 2009, 2010), I found that a phenomenological approach to understanding religious discourse within the vegan community of practice to be most useful, supported by literature from the anthropology of ethics and morality (Laidlaw 2017; Mattingly and Throop 2018). In narrowing down my objectives to focus on discourse around conversion and the practice of giving testimonials within the context of going vegan "for the animals," I then turned to the concept of rupture from the anthropology of religion, in which ideas around belief, time, issues of continuity/discontinuity, as well as ethnographies of evangelical and pentecostal communities, helped me to better understand ways in which language and power are linked through religious discourse. These ideas are compatible with Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992, 1995, 1999) explorations of the construction of meaning and self through practices and sociolinguistic competencies. In other words, participants engage with sociolinguistic competencies around veganism in the context of conversion testimonials and other "religious" discourse, which in turn helps to better understand how vegans in Houston are creating identities and building a community of practice. I now turn to a brief explanation of the phenomenological approach to religion, which serves as a foundation to understanding religious discourse within the CofP.

2.3.1 Phenomenology of Religion

In order to begin sorting out certain ambiguities about what constitutes the religious dimension around discourse and even ideas related to outreach ("preachy vegans," "preaching veganism") in this study, I found that Csordas's ideas of alterity, or otherness, were a useful starting point. In "Asymptote of the Ineffable: Embodiment, Alterity, and the Theory of Religion" (2004), Csordas et al. juxtapose traditional phenomenology of religion with

contemporary ideas about alterity, or otherness. Alterity is understood as the "phenomenological kernel of religion, a part of the structure of being- in- the- world," such that while there is a "presumed interiority of religious experience," this critique modifies the phenomenological understanding of religion as "a majestic and wholly 'Other' with the notion of alterity of the gendered self as *embodied otherness*, as well as the recognition of political alterity as a religious structure" (2004, 163). This idea of an embodied otherness is congruent with placing focus on practices as opposed to individual identities, which is compatible with the CofP approach. Further, in order to better situate the idea of alterity/otherness within a vegan CofP, I discovered that ethical veganism in terms of religious discourse warrants a sort of *sui generis* phenomenological approach (Tremlett 2014, viii). Thus, eschewing presuppositions, this approach asserts that the *religious dimension of culture must be studied on its own terms,* which lends itself well to understanding beliefs and ideologies which motivate individuals to give testimonials of conversion to ethical veganism. These testimonials are a form of outreach, which also have the effect of "preaching" veganism to others, or proselytizing, and creating new converts.

2.3.2 The Anthropology of Ethics and Morality

Second, I found this thesis to benefit greatly from the engagement of phenomenology of religion with an anthropological approach to ethics and morality. Along these lines, Csordas's (1999) attempt at a "cultural phenomenology" grounds more "ostensibly universal dimensions of human existence" by linking selfhood and experience within "specific social and cultural settings" (Laidlaw 2017). As Mattingly and Throop (2018, 478) state, an intensity of philosophical engagement within anthropology since the so-called "ethical turn" has never been more prominent, especially with regards to phenomenological emphasis on moral experience. To

this end, "the partial, perspectival, situated, affective, embodied, horizon-defined, and defining modes that characterize our existence as humans, as well as their shifting articulations, and the forms of revealing and concealing that are necessarily associated with such shifts, are foregrounded" (2018, 482). In other words, the moral experiences of vegans through religious discourse around conversion within the CofP are revealed and placed in a position of prominence which leads to a more nuanced analysis of embodied otherness. Further, ideas of embodied moral experience, subjectivity and relationality of being are prominent in this phenomenological discussion situated around anthropological views of ethics and morality, which is compatible with the approach this thesis takes towards understanding ethical veganism in terms of identity construction within a vegan CofP. Furthermore, an "ontological primacy" which resides in the subject (the human as enmeshed with other social beings and physical environments) results in a phenomenological resistance to reducing human experience to "mere social fact," or the arbitrary product of particular social or discursive histories (2018, 482). This conceptual premise benefits this thesis as it seeks to describe ethical veganism in terms of religious discourse without "ready-made boundaries" of religion versus secular practices, belief systems, and ideologies. Thus, a large segment of the research population (especially atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists) is less apt to feel alienated by ideas around "preaching veganism," conversion discourse, testimonials, and even the idea of a "Green Church."

2.3.3 The Anthropology of Christianity and the Idea of Rupture

Finally, in relating my exploration of religious discourse around conversion to veganism to concepts and theory from the anthropology of religion, I focused specifically on the idea of "rupture," or "breaking from the past," from the anthropology of Christianity. Beginning with Ruth Marshall's *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (2009), ideas of

conversion and being "born – again" as a sociocultural force ties into the production of political practices and representation. In other words, as with vegan activism and political consumerism., the social movement responds to and engages with "epistemological, normative and ontological insecurities, engendering individual and collective renewal and regeneration through a process of conversion based on the idiom of new birth" (2009, 3). Further, Marshall (2009, 51) argues that the attraction for people in such great numbers to social-religious movements around being "born again" is this *vision of rupture*, both individual and collective.

This idea fits in well with the idea of generalized thematic discourse around veganism as a lifestyle movement based on giving up the old (animal-based products and animals as commodities) and embracing the new (plant-based products and animals as sentient beings). In further relating "born-again" epistemologies to embodied responses, the project of conversion to a new religion, or *new way of life* (such as veganism) involves the "elaboration of new modes of government of the self and of others, in which practices of faith are fostered by specific disciplines of the body and the mind, emphasizing purity, rectitude, righteousness, and interiority" (Marshall 2009, 3). These "disciplines of the body and mind" may also be related to the creation of taboos around eating certain foods, which is a key element of conversion to veganism.

It is important to mention that the idea of conversion is a topic found more broadly in anthropology as well. While Christianity lends itself well to the idea of rupture as a faith tradition essentially built around the rupture concept both temporally and in terms of its view(s) of salvation, it is not the only religion with rebirth or new life ideas. For example, one of the classic ethnographies of religion by Victor Turner is focused on the *Mukanda,* or circumcision ritual among the Ndembu communities of Africa. In this story of conversion and rite of passage

to adulthood, Ndembu boys "die," and men are "made" (Turner 1970). A more recent example is Diane Austin-Broos' discussion of the anthropology of conversion, which considers conversion as a cultural passage in light of the dynamic struggle between modern secular worldviews and traditional religious ones with respect to globalization, identity politics, and the increasing importance of religion in the lives of individuals (Austin-Broos 2003,1). In a broad sense, while an anthropology of conversion is focused on representation and phenomenology, the discipline will "invariably return to the practice of social life in which the various embodiments of meaning are sustained in relational ways" (2003, 9). This also provides a link to methodological themes concerning social practice and agency, which are compatible with both Cherry's relational approach (2006) and community of practice theory.

At times, conversion to a new belief system is in line with revolution, power and struggle, and the idea of *rupture* of both time and belief. This idea was promulgated by Joel Robbins in his work with the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea (*Becoming Sinners,* 2004) and in his critique of "continuity thinking" within the anthropology of Christianity (Robbins 2007). Further, Robbins explored ideas of rupture in the sense of being "born – again" as breaking with the past, a separation from practices, ideas, material realities, and old ways of thinking and believing (Robbins 2004, 2006), which is in many ways similar to vegans who give up not only animal-based products but beliefs around animals as commodities in general. Another way of looking at the idea of rupture comes from Birgit Meyer's *'Make a complete break with the past': Memory and Post-colonial modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse* (1998, 316), in which ideas of deliverance and the urge to become new or "born again" is a process which involves a breaking with ancestral traditions and "primitive" celebrations. "Ancestral traditions" in terms of veganism in Houston may be related back to the history of Houston as "cattle country," and from

the perspective of many vegan participants, “outdated ways of viewing animals” as commodities.

Further, Meyer draws a clear analogy between the pentecostalist conceptualization of conversion in terms of a rupture with the past and “modernity's self - definition in terms of progress and continuous renewal” (1998, 317). In other words, for vegans in Houston experiencing a rupture of belief systems which manifests in practices within the vegan CofP, modernity itself may be questioned with regards to using animals for food and as property.

While conversion is often linked to power structures and social upheaval, Joel Robbins (2017) also asks if there can be conversion *without* cultural change? In further describing religious conversion in terms of rupture, as well as power structures linked with moral torment, Robbins (2019, 218) states this rupture also signifies a breaking *towards the future*, where “conversion is like revolution, in that both are, at least in their fuller forms, processes of change undertaken in light of a story about how such change can work.” From a syncretic standpoint, Robbins argues that Christianity is a culture of secondarity, meaning it is “designed to come after another culture that previously guided its converts.” Moreover, converts do not completely reject their prior culture but critically evaluate components of that culture in relation to the new Christian values, producing a duplex cultural formation that regularly fosters critical reflection and ongoing cultural change. (Robbins 2017, 2). This may be related back to veganism as a cultural reaction (as it manifests in testimonials) to what are seen by participants as shortcomings of vegetarianism in addressing issues of dairy and egg production systems, as well as the role of speciesism which is seen to be promulgated by “prior culture” related to non-vegan lifeways. In further consideration of prior cultural affiliations of vegan and vegan-curious newcomers to VSOP as a CofP, I shift now to what entails the material focus of conversion to veganism: a

change in consumption patterns around food, which must also be viewed from a critical standpoint.

2.4 The Anthropology of Food

The anthropology of food is a rich and varied category (Mintz 1986; Lévi-Strauss 1997; Yan 2012; Schlosser 2001; Clark 2004; Parasecoli 2005; Douglas 2013; Adams 2015; Greenebaum and Dexter 2017; Markowitz and Avieli 2020). These and other salient accounts of the role of food in shaping belief systems as worldviews point to food as a locus of symbolic expression and lived experience, the medium for which humans define and express their way of life (Sylvestre 2009, 3). Further, food shapes identity and cultural heritage (Brulotte and Di Giovine 2013; Del Giudice 2010). One may take these ideas of worldviews, identity and cultural heritage into account when considering motivations and barriers to veganism as well as the establishment of new ideologies around veganism. Further these accounts of food systems helped me to better relate the vegan community of practice to ideas of purity, power, commodification of animals, gendered analyses of food, and vegan punk subculture, which furthered the connection between food, ethics and identity construction.

Within the interdisciplinary field of food studies, vegan studies are a scholarly enterprise that analyzes and deconstructs the history of veganism, vegan identity, and the representation of veganism in popular and academic discourse (Greenebaum 2018, citing Wright 2015). While classic research focused on motivation and process for adopting a vegan diet, including the "catalytic" shift in worldview (Greenebaum 2018, 2), barriers to veganism are plentiful in the non-vegan world, especially arising from pressure from friends and family. Thus, the scholarly emphasis on social networks as support systems for vegans to maintain vegan identity and ideology (Cherry 2015). Vegan studies have revealed high levels of stigma towards vegans, such

as Twine's "vegan killjoys" (2014). However, the major limitation to these studies is that the research population has been limited to mostly white, heterosexual, and middle-class, assuming a "race-neutral" stance, meaning that motivations, opportunities, and experience of adopting a vegan lifestyle will be similar without regard to race, class, and gender. Vegan scholars expose the neoliberal ideology of "post-racial," which reinforces ideologies of colorblindness, individualism, and veganism as consumer lifestyle (Harper 2010, 2011, 2012). In other words, "post-racial" in this sense actually benefits and reinforces profit margins of corporate producers (factory farms), as veganism (as the alternative to factory farms) is assumed to be available to all without factoring in alienation around race, class and gender. This leaves a sizable proportion of any given population no alternative but to "buy into" factory farmed animal-based products. As Anthropologist Brad Weiss noted in his research on consumption, commoditization, and everyday practice of the Haya communities of Northwest Tanzania: "Certain qualities of food make it the most appropriate vehicle for describing alienation" (Sylvestre 2009, 16, quoted in Clark 2004, 19). In further exploring these ideas of alienation and otherness, I look beyond animal ethics to anthropological concerns with vegan privilege and whiteness around access to vegan foods, which also considers barriers to community-building of VSOP as a CofP.

2.4.1 Vegan Privilege and Whiteness

In asking "Why food studies, veganism and race?," A. Breeze Harper asserts, "Food studies are a useful platform for understanding socio-spatial epistemologies of consumption" (Harper 2012, 159). Food habits are powerful systems of symbols, as the "relationship with food speaks volumes about beliefs, passions, background knowledge and assumptions" (2012, 159, referencing Miller and Deutsch 2009, 7). Further, while there are many reasons why people choose to become or not to become vegan, there are also socioeconomic and structural

hindrances that keep veganism from being a viable option for many others, especially the fact that veganism continues to be a "largely white, upper-middle class identity"; often depicted as an "elitist endeavor" (Wright 2017, 2).

In "Decolonizing veganism: On resisting vegan whiteness and racism," Jennifer Polish (2016) confronts privilege around veganism and delivers a scathing critique of the ubiquitous and unmarked whiteness of veganism. She also states it is difficult, if not impossible, to critically reflect on veganism as both a politically charged foodways practice and a critical/ethical commentary on animality without attending to the racial implications of animality (2016, 373). In fact, the very definition of human, she contends, is the achievement of "Westernized whiteness." Further, Polish argues that it is "absolutely vital to centralize POC (People of Color) models of veganism that challenge this whiteness, which will serve to promote the integration of normalization and radicalization" (2016, 374).

As a critique, Greenebaum (2018, 1) believes associating veganism with whiteness and privilege is *wrong*, as it both marks and marginalizes people of color within the vegan movement and makes veganism unappealing to potential newcomers to the vegan movement. Moreover, she contends that vegans of color experience both visible and invisible stigmas from both mainstream vegan movements and their ethnic communities. In a qualitative study, Greenebaum found three reasons people of color (POC) are resistant to veganism: it is linked to whiteness, affiliated with privilege, and "deemed incompatible with ethnicity," especially those associated with non-Euroamerican cultures. In other words, "because food is tied to culture, refusing to eat the food provided by the family is interpreted as a rejection of the culture and the family" (2018, 11). Further, veganism may be seen as elitist for its promotion of white vegans in the media, the

emphasis on veganism as a consumer movement, and prioritizing animal rights over human rights (2018, 1).

In questioning the concept of vegan privilege, Greenebaum (2017, 360) utilizes the theory of intersectionality to explain that the concept is vague and lacks contextualization. She contends that veganism itself is not a privilege, but rather the ability to make food choices is ultimately the privilege. By examining the credibility and utility of critique of veganism as privileged lifestyle, Greenebaum also finds that these allegations conceal and reinforce the cultural invisibility of speciesism and carnism (Joy 2020), referring to normalization of consuming animals and mindless eating: "To not have to think about, feel, or observe the effect of your diet on animals, the environment, and/or other animals, is a type of privilege" (Greenebaum 2017, 360). Further, Greenebaum asserts that "just as nonvegans need to recognize their carnist privilege and understand how animal liberation must be essential to issues of food justice," vegans must include issues of social class and race into the analysis, as systems of domination work together. In other words, if speciesism shares the same ideological foundation as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class exploitation, then ''there is no hope it can be eradicated while these systems remain in place'' (Greenebaum 2017, 364, citing Hooks 1989, 22).

One of the most vocal and prolific POC vegans is A. Breeze Harper, a critical race feminist focused on critical food geographies. Harper's *Sistah Vegan* Project, founded in 2005, is an online project which explores the black American female vegan experience, considering race, legacies of colonialism, sexism and classism as they manifest in American vegan praxis. In 2010, Harper published an edited volume of narratives and critical essays called *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health and Society*, which has had a great influence on

vegan communities. Harper's anthology explores the different motivations for black women becoming vegan, including animal rights, personal health, and environmental reasons. *Sistah Vegan's* most monumental contribution highlights how black women use plant-based veganism as a tool to decolonize the body from a colonial diet that is killing the black community (Greenebaum 2018, 3).

In addressing what a "race-conscious veganism" might look like, Harper (2012, 162) refers to author Queen Afua, one of the most influential African American vegan activists within the black community. In *City of Wellness* (2008), Afua proclaims that while "PETA caters to white middle-class socio-spatial epistemologies prioritizing animal rights," her aim is to "take care of the racialized suffering of human beings first, pointing out the nutritional-related deficiencies of the African diaspora" (Harper 2012, 163). This publication further promotes a "merging of race-consciousness and anti-corporate capitalism, anti-neo-colonialism to heal female black bodies through whole food veganism, calling for a rebuilding of home spaces especially the kitchen into space of self-love" (Afua 2008; 2001), a "socio-spatial epistemology" (Harper 2012, 163). Thus, veganism can be a form of resistance to the industrial food complex that oppresses and disenfranchises poor people of color who lack access to healthy, affordable food (Harper 2012, 2011, 2010). A related ethnography which portrays the intersection of race, oppression and justice (relating back to religion and the idea of rupture) may be found in "Slavery Food, soul food, salvation food: veganism and identity in the African Hebrew Israelite Community" (Avieli and Markowitz 2018). This paper considers how food items which were once associated with slavery in the US are given new meanings associated with salvation in the African Hebrew Israelite Community, a transnational millenarian group located in Israel whose focus is on the transformative powers of the vegan "Edenic diet" (2018,1).

2.4.2 Critical Geographies of Race

Within critical geographies of race, Harper (2012, 156) further contends that the ways in which humans develop their knowledge base is directly connected to the "embodied experiences of the places and spaces we navigate through," so that "space is raced/racialized, sexualized, gendered and classed, directly affecting individual and place identities, including one's philosophy of what counts as a moral food system." She notes that collectively, the low-income urban black American relationship with healthier food options is also influenced by environmental racism and lack of access to public transportation to get to healthier food sources. In other words, the vegan moral food system cannot be separated from racialized space as place. Referencing the Slow Food movement, organic food, Farmers' Markets, CSA's, and "nicely stocked whole foods grocery stores," Harper further contends these privileges continue to be most accessible by "white socio-economically stable people" (2012, 164, citing Gottlieb and Joshi 2010; and Slocum 2007), such that racism is classed, and classism is raced.

Neighborhood gentrification is also a factor: "a racially classed and coded term meaning that urban low-income people of color start seeing white middle-class people move into their neighborhoods with accompanying options to healthier lifestyles, such as Whole Foods Markets in the middle of what has been declared a food desert" (Harper 2012, 168, citing Freeman 2006). A food desert may be defined as an area "with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominately lower income neighborhoods and communities (McClintock 2011, citing USDA 2009). To be aware of socio-spatial epistemologies around lack of access to healthy foods, especially with regards to race and class, is important to addressing structural barriers to veganism in this study and an important component of deliverables to the client VSOP. This awareness also speaks to ways in which

community-building by VSOP as a CofP is challenged. I now turn to literature which supports findings of structural barriers to veganism related to the main consumer/producer relationship engendered by factory farming of animals.

2.5 Ethical Veganism and the Political Economy of Factory Farming

Ethical vegans are passionate about the plight of animals in factory farms. Shifting from ethics and moral considerations around human well-being and rights to those of animals raised for food, I consider the meaning of a political economy of factory farming. This system is an often-unseen barrier to veganism, as its complexities are hidden in plain sight. Originating in Eric Wolf's book, *Europe and the People Without History* (1982), the term "political economy" is rooted in Marxian understandings of unequal power, history, and the holistic viewpoint that culture is intertwined with political and economic forces which often remain undetected by citizen consumers, as in hegemony. However, as Asad (1993, 3) noted, the attachment of political economy to economistic Marxism "needs to be updated to understanding of production as a cultural process." According to Heyman (2013, 89), "the defining idea of political economy is that the economy is central but, in contrast to conventional economic approaches, it must be contextualized in the state, politics, and social structure, as well as normative values."

Furthermore, Heyman refers to a "robust anthropology," whose methodological and analytical strengths reside in "breaking through official surfaces" in consideration of more subtle relationships and processes within the main domains of power (2013, 89). In applying political economy to the factory farming of animals, I am better able to contextualize the capitalist commodification of animals within a system of producers and consumers informed by normative and hegemonic values given to animals raised for food, as well as the impact of vegan political consumerism. Marxian political economy within political consumerism as a cultural context

implies engagement with oppression and conflict in terms of speciesist regimes, especially around factory farming, including the analyses of power relations as it is manifests in social and cultural relations between producers and consumers. These social relations, in accordance with Wolf (2001, 391-93; 1999), need to be seen in an active mode, as "organizing processes," while culture needs to be seen in the same way, as "symbolically mediated signification and communication." By seeing social and cultural relations between producers and consumers in the context of political economy, I am better able to understand how larger systems impact individuals *within the vegan CofP*. It is also important to understand animal commodification, as this further shows how systemic factors impact individuals, both human and animal.

2.5.1 Capitalist Commodification of Animals

Some scholars consider the capitalist commodification of animals within a modern-day neoliberal political economy of factory farming as the root cause of animal suffering, which is often the main motivational focus of those who go vegan "for the animals." This system of commodification also informs practices within the vegan CofP, especially around activism and outreach. Further, the capitalist commodification of animals ties into beliefs around kinship with animals, especially within the context of testimonials, and the humane myth, or belief that there is no humane way to raise animals for food or products, especially with regards to dairy and eggs.

In this section, I consider Noel Castree's (2003) understanding of capitalist commodification applied to animals raised for food in factory farms. In a review of contemporary Marxist writings on human geography and the commodification of nature, which includes animals in factory farms, Castree (2003, 273) notes that recent Marxist writings about capitalism-nature relations have tried to highlight both the specificity of capitalist

commodification and its effects on ecologies and bodies, yet explanatory and normative dimensions of this work are in danger of being misunderstood and remain largely implicit. This problematizes the overarching idea of commodification of nature and animals in capitalist societies. For Castree, the terms "commodification" and "nature" have numerous meanings and implications within contemporary Marxist writings, yet he finds a common denominator in the idea that the "commodity status of a thing, object, idea, *creature*, person or what-have-you is not intrinsic to it but, rather, assigned" (2003, 277). The question then becomes what characteristics do things [animals] take on when they become commodities? At the most abstract level, commodification refers to "a process where qualitatively distinct things are rendered equivalent and saleable through the medium of money" (2003, 278), or exchange value. In reference to animals in the factory farm setting, then, it is important to recognize meanings given to animals as commodities. In other words, vegans who strive to combat factory farming through practices of activism and outreach consider *meanings given to animals by non-vegan producers and consumers: mere commodities to be bought and sold.* Further, vegan identity within VSOP as a community of practice is often constructed around individual and group advocacy for animals in factory farms.

I also found it important to consider elements of capitalist commodification. as this further helps me to decipher how meanings given to animals as commodities impact individuals in the vegan CofP, as well as group identity and barriers to veganism. Though not unique to capitalist commodification, elements of privatization, alienability, individuation, abstraction, valuation and displacement are situated in relation to and within Marxist writings about the subject (Castree 2003, 279).

With reference to the factory farming of animals, privatization refers to corporate control

and the "assignation of legal title to a named individual, group or institution" with exclusive control over animals as commodities: their bodies, their lives from birth to slaughter, and control over the people who raise them, tend to them and render them and their bodily contributions into saleable commodities such as meat, eggs, and milk. Privatization therefore gives producers the power to control animals in a way that in theory takes power away from the non-vegan consumer without their awareness.

Alienability refers to the "capacity of a given commodity, and specific classes of commodities, to be physically and morally separated from their sellers" (Castree 2003, 279). In the case of animals as commodities, then, this alienability is two-fold and double-dimensional, in that animals have no say in the disposition of their bodies as saleable goods and are therefore necessarily alienated from their own existence. Further consumers of animals as commodities experience profound alienation from the animals providing these consumable goods, a term which Carol Adams refers to as the "absent referent" (2015), in which meat and animal by-products are further sexualized and politicized. For a commodity in a capitalist society to be subject to market exchange, most Marxists would argue that it must also be alienable (Castree 2003, 280). Alienability therefore also takes power away from the non-vegan consumer and contributes to animal suffering, as humans are alienated from their food to the point that animal sentience becomes less important to the consumer in lieu of convenience.

Individuation is linked to privatization and alienability, referring to "the representational and physical act of separating a specific thing or entity from its supporting context" (Castree 2003, 280). In the case of animal bodies and products, this would refer to placing animals in a bounded ontological entity known as, for instance the meat exchange, or pork prices, such that what counts as an animal commodity in capitalist society is a label which is socially determined

and acceptable. Labelling laws around animals are also a significant barrier to veganism, especially with regards to labels such as “grass-fed,” “pasture-raised” and “cage-free,” which are considered misleading by vegans and part of the humane myth.

Meanwhile, abstraction is “a process whereby the qualitative specificity of any individualized thing [an animal] is assimilated to the qualitative homogeneity of a broader type or process” (2003, 281). Two types of abstraction may be applied to animal commodification, namely functional and spatial abstraction, such that function and location of animal commodities are the same in different contexts and locations, making them saleable goods. In other words, meat from one factory farm on the East Coast retains the same meaning as meat from another factory farm on the West Coast. The element of abstraction further acts as a labelling mechanism, such that “all meat,” “all dairy’ or “all eggs,” no matter from which part of the country they originate, are marketed in the same way to non-vegan consumers, further concealing issues of animal sentience and promoting ideas that commodification of animals is socially determined and acceptable. Abstraction also acts as a means of reinforcing alienability of animal bodies as commodities.

Valuation refers to the ways in which “things take on specific form and value” (Castree 2003, 281). For commodified animals, these ways might include specific practices of breeding for genetic enhancement of, say, breast size in turkeys, or utilizing certain feeds in cattle to produce leaner cuts of beef. For corporate factory farms, one might argue the importance of valuation lies in the profit margins, which are also calculated by speed of the production line and paying minimum or below- minimum wage to mostly undocumented immigrant laborers, a form of unethical exploitation of humans within the context of valuation. It should also be noted that valuation in this respect is no different from day laborers who suffer for less than minimum wage

to produce fruits and vegetables. Further, the danger of this type of valuation is that animal bodies [and human bodies as labor] are rendered meaningless to producers and consumer, as commodities become "mere means to the end of accumulation for accumulation's sake" (2003, 282), referencing Smith's (1984 [2010]) ideas of the "production of nature."

Castree also references Boyd (2001) in his work on the commodification of chickens to illustrate Smith's thesis, in the ways in which "natural" entities [chickens] become physically altered "all the way down" to suit the profitability requirements of the agro-food companies who manufacture them (2003, 282), the "real subsumption of nature to capitalist accumulation" (Watts 2000, 300). Animals in agriculture are further examined by Stuart and Gunderson (2020) as "fictitious commodities," a term adapted from Karl Polyani in his 1944 book *The Great Transformation*. Utilizing Marxist conceptual frameworks including the subsumption of nature and alienation, Stuart and Gunderson describe animals in agriculture as an "extreme example of animal commodification whose use resembles the exploitation of land and labor" in the context of this idea. Further, nature as "internal" in this sense means that nature [chickens] has lost its independent capacity to resist commodification. In other words, its nature has lost its naturalness as it is subjected to the "requirements of production," which may include in its design genetic modification and the use of growth hormones (Castree 2003, 286). Finally, while the industrial technologies of the "livestock revolution" of the past half-century are often cited as the root cause for great and considerable environmental, ethical and public health alarm, Gunderson (2013, 259) argues that it is capital's "blind drive for self-expansion and self-accumulation" that is the source for most animals suffering in factory farms. These ideas around valuation, the production of nature, fictitious commodities, and the blind drive towards profit margins further

magnify alienation of non-vegan consumers from their animal food sources, thus building upon barriers to veganism.

Finally, the element of displacement refers to "something appearing, phenomenally, as something other than itself," or involving "one set of phenomena manifesting themselves in a way that, paradoxically, occludes them" (Castree 2003, 282). As Melanie Joy puts it, consuming meat appears to be "natural, normal, and necessary" (Joy 2020), and within this context producers seek to make it appear as such as part of the "blind," profit-driven commodity production and sale of animal bodies and their products. This type of displacement leads to "commodity fetishism" around meat and other animal products, which further occludes the exploitation of both laborers and animals in factory farm settings. In conclusion, Castree's six elements of capitalist commodification may be aptly applied to the commodification of animals and utilized in the analysis of barriers to veganism. I now turn to the vegan response to the problem of capitalist commodification of animals, which resides in political consumerist practices within the vegan CofP.

2.5.2 Political Consumerism

Vegan participants in this study argue that contemporary forms of ethical veganism have largely developed as a reaction to these elements of capitalist commodification of animals, especially alienability and valuation. In a culture of consumption, vegan identity may be tied to political consumerism as a rejection of the values held true to capitalist commodification of animals. Furthermore, from an animal abolitionist standpoint [the belief that the property status of animals must be abolished (Francione 1996; 2015), veganism may be defined as "the ideological belief that abstinence from non-human animal use has the power to liberate non-human animals" (Wrenn 2011, 11).

First, regarding the nonvegan citizen consumer, I consider the idea of *speciesism*, the term coined by Richard Ryder in 1970, defined as "discrimination against or exploitation of certain animal species, based on an assumption of mankind's superiority" (Ryder 1998, 320), or failing to recognize equality of sentience (Wrenn 2011, 11). It follows that ethical vegans are committed to combatting speciesism not only between humans and non-humans, but between species of animals, such as ideas of preferential treatment given to "pets" such as dogs and cats over "food animals" such as pigs and chickens. Second, I consider the notion of carnism as a manifestation of speciesism. The term *carnism* was introduced in 2001 by social psychologist Melanie Joy, and revisited in her 2009 [2020] book *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*. The theory of carnism is situated around the "meat paradox," or inconsistency in attitudes and actions towards different species of animals. The invisible belief system (and ensuing practice), or ideology, that conditions people to eat certain animals is called carnism and may be considered the opposite of veganism. According to Joy, carnism is the dominant belief system in the nonvegan realm, organized around "intensive, extensive, and unnecessary violence towards animals" ("What is Carnism" 2021). As a system of oppression of non-human animals, carnism informs and invests in a political economy of producers and consumers which reinforces the belief system around it.

As an example of ethnography centered around these ideas of carnism related to political consumerism, Sylvestre's study of punk and zine subcultures (2009, 2010) and the dynamic interplay of personal meaning-building is an example of anti-consumerism as well as the ways in which the political economy influences barriers to expression of anti-consumerist practices (Sylvestre 2009, 6). In reference to Dylan Clark's punk vegans (2004 [2013]), Sylvestre believes that by resisting commodification and capitalism, veganism becomes a "symbol and tool of

resistance within a religious ideology" which "strengthens resolve and cohesion of the group" (2009, 16). This idea hearkens back to my own ideas around rupture, conversion and religious discourse within the vegan CofP. Sylvestre further asks how punks embody purposeful marginalization through a vegan diet, which also speaks to identity construction and choosing to remail peripheral within the community of practice model.

As supportive evidence, Wrenn (2011, 16) states that in response to rapidly expanding speciesism [the globalization of speciesism], the vegan abolition movement has become a pertinent social movement concerned with the "neglected rights of non-human animals" and functions as a "bottom-up, consumer-based site of resistance." Here, the [vegan] consumer-citizen is "engaged in merging economic action with political action in hopes of creating social change with certain choices in consumption" (2011, 17, citing Parker 1999). Finally, Singer and Mason (2006, 17) posited that a mass adoption of veganism could stop the demand for non-human animal products and cause non-human animal businesses to stop production and shift to new industries. At the time of this writing, Tyson Foods has introduced an entire line of plant-based "alternative protein products" (Tyson 2021), and other corporate giants in the food industry have followed suit. Thus, Singer and Mason believe what we choose to purchase and consume can become an important political act (2006, 17, citing Micheletti and Follesdal 2007; Singer and Mason 2006). I found this literature to be helpful in understanding how vegans and vegan-curious newcomers engaged in political consumerism as a practice within a vegan community of practice, as well as the ways in which political consumerism ties into the greater vegan lifestyle movement.

This chapter has covered the concept of community of practice (CofP) and the application of the term to language, gender and power relations, with further contextualization in

subcultural studies and social ("lifestyle") movement theory. Further, I have situated ideas of religious discourse around conversion to ethical veganism in literature from the anthropology of religion, with special consideration of a phenomenological approach to religion, the anthropology of ethics and morality, and the idea of rupture. I also considered structural barriers to veganism in this literature review, namely ideas around vegan privilege and whiteness, including the critical geography of race. Finally, I considered capitalist commodification of animals within a political economy of factory farming framework, which builds upon vegan identity in the CofP and contributes to barriers to veganism. By situating the understanding of VSOP as a CofP within these larger theoretical frameworks, I am well situated to proceed with Findings and Analysis, which focuses on the main research question: How are vegans and vegan-curious newcomers in Houston creating, building, and maintaining a community of practice which contributes to vegan subcultures and the greater vegan lifestyle movement? I am further better equipped to present deliverables to the client which answer the questions: What does the group mean to participants? What are the barriers to going vegan in Houston? What strategies can be implemented to bring vegan and vegan-curious newcomers back to the monthly potlucks and other events? Finally, in my discussion chapter, I tie in theory to application by situating findings, analysis and deliverables within these theoretical frameworks. I now turn to Methodology, which considers project design, project issues, data collection, data analysis, research population, space as place, and ethics of research.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction to Methods

With the support of the Vegan Society of Peace (VSOP) Board of Directors and Dr. Alan Clune as my site sponsor, I proceeded upon a 14-month IRB-approved research project journey. The scope of the project was preceded by months of exploratory research both virtually and in the field site vicinity, as well as months of follow-up throughout the writing process, including attendance at virtual potlucks on the Zoom platform in October, November and December 2020. Though not a longitudinal study, the project has some aspects of that mode of investigation. Further, as a multi-sited study, the project is geared towards better understanding what "Vegan Houston" looks like in terms of vegan subcultural affiliations and the greater vegan lifestyle movement.

In this chapter I begin with project design – what I initially envisioned – and trace the evolution of the project to what it has become. Through employment of the traditional ethnographic approaches of participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews, coupled with quantitative analysis based on survey data, I am well-equipped to tell the story of how vegan and vegan-curious participants at VSOP events came to seek and build community. Further, by looking closely at participants' motivations, beliefs, and identity, as well as barriers to becoming vegan, I am better able to address the research questions, not as a solution but as anthropological insight into the structure of cultural processes around veganism, which ultimately affects billions of sentient animals in the factory farming system.

3.2 Initial Design of the Project and Project Issues

The initial design of the project rests on the classic anthropological approach, which is

ethnography, or the writing of culture. I employed a mixed methods approach: participant observation, taking field notes, qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, and write-up. As an applied anthropologist, I understand the need for careful in-depth analysis in order to address the research questions which are important to the client, and a holistic mixed methods approach is well-suited to this aim. As well, the holism of anthropological inquiry calls for an emic/etic dialectical conversation which is representative of a postmodernist approach to balancing experience with intuition. Indeed, the hallmarks of applied anthropology also include the balance of theory with praxis.

Not only did the project change and evolve during the IRB-approved period of field work and data collection, so did the nature of the project issues. Late in the process of write-up, I was led to make some stark realizations about the need to change course in both the research questions as well as regarding which portions of the data would best serve findings and analysis. While my initial focus was on VSOP in terms of belief systems rooted in a producer/consumer political economy around the factory farming of animals, I found the need to shift project issues to VSOP as a community of practice (CofP), with special attention given to quasi-religious or religious-like discourse, especially around ideas of conversion, and barriers associated with vegan privilege and whiteness. While this was a complex process of "give and take," I found it be of better service to the client VSOP and more useful to the greater anthropological discipline in the end.

3.3 Preliminary Research

Since I received IRB approval in the spring of 2018, I engaged in preliminary research through both qualitative and quantitative methods. I further utilized methodologies which would support the client in a holistic manner, including in-depth analysis of outreach via web, print,

word of mouth, as well as campaigns, events and a "Walk for Animals, Walk for Peace," which is related to marches and protests commonly associated with veganism. I continually monitored outreach on the web, especially via the client's Facebook Pages created around specific events, as well as a Roundtable Discussion Group, a closed group which I was invited to attend by the Founders. The Roundtable Discussion Group provided a glimpse into insider issues, and I treated this opportunity as an emic gift. Other linked groups include "Vegan 2nd Saturdays VSOP Recipe Share" and "Volunteer Team: Vegan Society of PEACE." Further, VSOP maintains a presence on other social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, as well as other vegan Facebook groups and forums which I joined. There is no shortage of vegan groups on Facebook, and I joined several of these groups in order to better understand the conversations and debates among vegans and non-vegans and to see where the vegan-curious individuals lie in relation to these forums. Some examples of these forums included the following: Cultivate Vegan/ Dallas - Ft. Worth, an initiative to help connect vegan entrepreneurs, business owners and content creators; Bad Vegans; North Texas Vegans; Vegan Sanity – Meat Eater and Vegetarian Discussion and Debate; and Vegan Houston, a place to share vegan-friendly establishments around the city. There are many more groups related to animal activism, rescue and sanctuary which I also immersed myself within and learned from along the way.

Print media included pamphlets and magazines I picked up at the VSOP events, as well as links to online magazines and journals, articles and books about veganism. "Word-of-mouth" refers to remaining open to hearing from vegans, vegan-curious individuals and non-vegans alike in my journey, both in Houston and back home in Denton, as well as online. In general, for the duration of this project, when I spoke of the topic of my project, whether in-person or online, conversations would ensue regarding veganism or perception of vegans, even with long-time

acquaintances in the Houston area.

I also observed and participated in numerous campaigns, including the "VegFest Houston" events occurring in the summer; "Walk for Animals, Walk for Peace" event which coincides with the "Texas Go Vegan Week" every October; and "Vegan Thanks-Living" event in November, a vegan potluck held around Thanksgiving. Further, while I did not go on marches or protests during main field research time period, I gained knowledge through discussions and interviews with those who had participated in them. I do draw upon the slaughterhouse vigil arranged by the Houston Animal Save Movement attended in 2017 during the period of exploratory research, as the experience was invaluable to my understanding of the vegan perceptions and compassion towards animals bound for slaughter. Finally, I followed and monitored VSOP's support of animal rescue organizations such as the Chicken Rescue and Mini-Pig Rescue, both locally owned and operated, where they also hosted volunteer days.

3.3.1 Project Design

Regarding project design, I utilized both qualitative and quantitative ethnographic approaches, which included participant observation, intercept interviews, semi-structured interviews, attending events, and travel between the Denton and Houston area. As the qualitative portion of this project greatly outweighs the quantitative portion, most of my findings are based on the semi-structured interviews and observations at the monthly potlucks, while quantitative data from the surveys lends a nuanced analysis. Qualitative methods were utilized in this ethnography to best serve the objective of creating an emic perspective, or telling the story of what it mean to be vegan or vegan-curious in Houston *from the perspective of the participants*. While quantitative methods also serve a similar objective in this ethnography, they create a more extensive data set which is wider in scope than the more intensive interviews. Certainly, both

approaches together create a *holistic view* (one of the foundations of good ethnography) of what veganism in Houston look like.

Regarding the "intercept" interviews: I think of these as flow of conversations, mostly at the dinner table during the monthly potlucks. Sometimes, indeed, the idea of interception was more literal, when for instance I approached VegFest attendees, volunteers, and vendors with a question about perceptions of the event. Or, upon listening to conversations as people who waited in line to enter the venue or purchase goods and services, I joined the conversation. I also approached Board Members and volunteers on a regular basis at events, engaging in conversations from which I gained much insight into the structure of outreach, personal experiences from a "core member" standpoint, and volunteer highlights and challenges.

3.3.2 Qualitative Data Collection

For the main period of qualitative data collection (May 2018-July 2019), I began my research (following IRB approval) in May of 2018 at the "Second Saturday's potluck" event hosted by VSOP, which is held at the Houston Community College administrative building located downtown at Travis and Main. I also conducted follow-up research and have continued to communicate with research participants and Board members, also attending some of the virtual potlucks over the Zoom platform since October 2020.

3.3.2.1 Participant Observation

At the monthly potlucks, I participated by bringing (and later making) a vegan dish, sitting with different groups of people at different tables, taking field notes in a notebook, taking photos and videos with my iphone, conversing with participants and leaders (Board members and regulars), and assessing the overall group mood, energy, and dynamics. I often took note of the group demographics and number of newcomers in attendance as well, to the best of my ability.

As well, I collected pamphlets and other print media, which are displayed at the check-in desks; filled out recipe cards; participated in the "raffle drawing" at the end of each potluck; and spent time conversing with presenters and vendors who sometimes showed up to promote their vegan goods. I also learned much from speakers and presenters at the monthly potlucks, such as a presentation by one of the coordinators regarding compassion fatigue, exposure to animal rights images, and secondary trauma when working in animal rescue and animal rights (Observation, August 2018 potluck). Finally, I found it helpful to attend the "after-party mixers" held at the Whole Foods market in the nearby Montrose district, where I had a tea or coffee and listened in on vegan conversations as well as asked questions from time to time.

Qualitative data collection also included attending larger events such as "Vegan Thanks-Living" (the November 2018 potluck); the VSOP 15-year anniversary "Vegan Picnic in the Park" held at George Bush Park in west Houston (the March 2019 potluck); VegFest 2018 and 2019, held respectively at the Stafford Center (Stafford, Texas) and Minute Maid Park (downtown Houston); the "Walk for Animals, Walk for Peace" event (2018) held at Hermann park and the Miller Outdoor Theatre each October in celebration of Mahatma Gandhi's birthday; "Volunteer Day at the Chicken Rescue" (2018), located in Alvin, Texas to the south of Houston; and the "VSOP Earth Day" celebration (April 2019), held at Discovery Green Park in downtown Houston (March 2019). At Thanks-Living, I conversed with vendors, participants and leaders. At the VegFests, I took photos and videos of the crowds and food trucks; visited numerous booths, vendors and promoters; participated by trying numerous vegan dishes and sweets, even getting henna tattoos and aura readings; gathered informative pamphlets and other print media from animal rights/animal shelter/animal rescue organizations; attended the "Ask-A-Vegan" series of

panel discussions led by local vegan doctors (M.D's), parents, and athletes; and conversed with participants and fellow VSOP members and volunteers.

As well, I signed up as a volunteer during VegFest 2018 to conduct entrance and exit surveys for Dr. Clune, my site sponsor. In the break room, I met other volunteers and was able to gain interesting insight on the "volunteer experience" through their eyes. I also met the film crew and spoke to members of the security team. As a volunteer at VegFest Houston 2018, I was able to observe *and* experience volunteer jobs and tasks, and as I got a taste of what that entails, I better understood the "perks" and challenges of volunteering at larger venue vegan events. Further, from the perspective of "intercept" and other informal interview techniques associated with participant observation, I was better able to engage in analysis from my fieldnotes around these interactions with volunteers.

3.3.2.2 Interviews

While focusing on thought processes, motivations and behaviors conducive to my interlocutors' vegan ways of life, as well as barriers to full commitment, from June 28 through December 9, 2018, I conducted 29 semi-structured interviews. Two of these were couples' interviews, for a total of 32 interview participants. I used the QuickVoice App on my iphone to record the interviews while taking notes in my field notebook. The length of the interviews ranged from around 45 minutes to nearly two hours, with the average interview lasting about an hour to an hour and a half including introductions, going over the informed consent form, getting set up, eating or ordering coffee when at restaurants or cafes, and chatting after the interview. I also utilized an interview guide which helped to organize the flow of the conversation.

Regarding recruitment of interview participants, I approached numerous individuals at the monthly potlucks, as well as at the Whole Foods after-parties and at the Chicken Rescue,

taking down their contact information and calling or emailing them usually the following day. Since I was travelling back and forth to Houston, I set up interviews in clusters, with two or three on the same day. Most of the interviews were conducted in the early months of the project (June, July, August) with steady activity through December. The interview participants were a diverse, vibrant and passionate group of people from many walks of life according to age, class, race, ethnicity and religion. One interesting dynamic was the four couples I interviewed, two of which preferred a couples' interview and the other two separately. I also interviewed several young singles in their 20's and 30's whose perspective was interesting in comparison to the couples' experience of being vegan-curious and vegan. Older singles and those married to or in relationship with non-vegans also revealed wisdom which deepened my understanding of what it was like to navigate veganism in interpersonal relations.

3.3.3 Quantitative Data Collection

The quantitative data collection period ran almost concurrently with the main 14-month qualitative data collection period (May 2018-July 2019), beginning in June 2018, when I began distributing surveys at the monthly potlucks, until June of 2019, for a period of about 12 months.

I originally created two surveys to be distributed, the first an online survey to be posted by VSOP on their website/Facebook page. These survey questions were geared toward vegan-curious participants, including zip code data, demographic information and questions about access to vegan foods and products. The zip code data was utilized in the creation of a comprehensive map with the help of Geographic Information System (GIS) processing in the ArcMap program. The map assisted me in spatial analysis regarding distance to vegan-friendly establishments, issues of access, hindrances to veganism in Houston, and beneficial resources in the Greater Houston area for the vegan lifeway. The goal was 300 surveys, though a larger

sample was an option depending on public response.

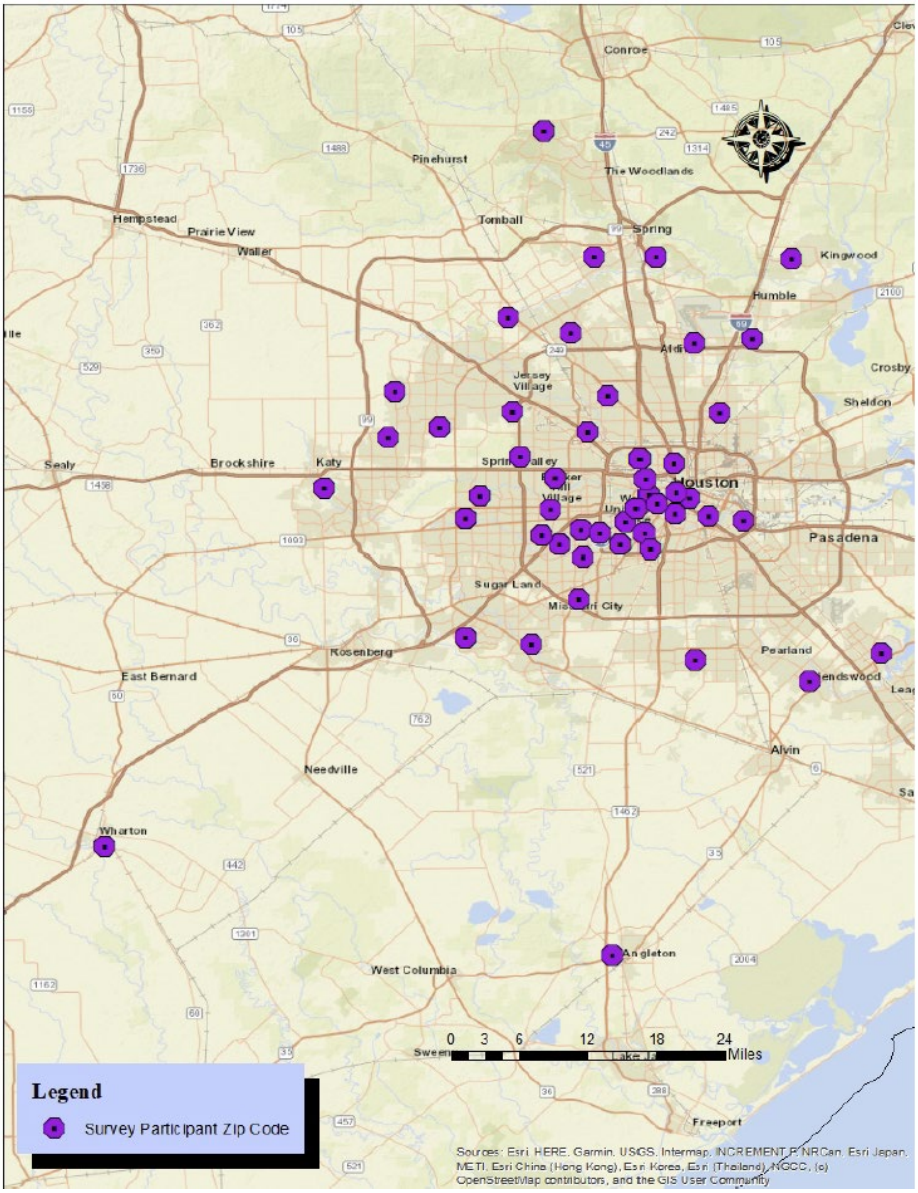
The second survey was an in-person survey which would be distributed to festival attendees at Veg Fest Houston in July of 2018. This survey focused on questions about mindsets, beliefs, values and goals which would be useful in gauging the emotional complexity of the subject. The goal was to have 500 surveys completed at this event, as thousands of potential participants visit VegFest each year. I then planned to use the quantitative data analysis program SPSS to analyze data.

There were significant changes to my ideas around quantitative data collection. After conferring with my site sponsor, Dr. Clune, the decision was made to not post the online survey, as his own experience with online surveys related to VSOP did not prove fruitful. Instead, I decided to combine the online survey and the in-person survey, a merging which proved to be the better option. Contrary to the projected number of surveys, I found that the survey-taking process was far more difficult than I expected. As an introvert, I often felt as though I were imposing on people's time, patience and attention. Personal insecurities aside, I was also aware of what I perceived to be inappropriate spaces and places for conducting surveys, especially at the annual vegan Thanks-Living event (November 2018 potluck), as I did not want to disturb people who seemed to be collectively in a more reflective and deeply grateful mood.

I also (to my own surprise) found the larger event venues such as VegFest and "Walk for Animals, Walk for Peace" less conducive to asking people to take surveys, even if they were standing in long lines at various vendors and food trucks, as attendees were more engaged in the excitement of the venue and less inclined to stop and fill out a survey. This was a particularly lengthy, paper "old school" survey as well, with 13 questions including some written response material. I would venture to say it was more like a questionnaire than a survey. Most surveys

were distributed at the monthly potlucks, where I could spend time interacting with the survey participants, as I thought of them almost as interview participants, though not nearly as in-depth. Most of my interview participants were also survey participants; in many cases, it was the survey that led to recruitment to participate in the in-depth semi-structured interview. In the end, I conducted a total of 111 surveys, averaging 15 per event.

Figure 3.1: Map of survey participants by zip code.



Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, USGS, Intermap, INCREMENT P, NRCan, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), Esri Korea, Esri (Thailand), NGCC, OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community.

Utilizing GIS in ArcMap, I created a map of survey participants by residence zip code (n = 111) (Fig. 3.1). Note that some points on the map represent several participants who reside in the same zip code. I noticed that most survey participants reside in Harris County, with a few from suburban and rural areas: Fort Bend County to the southwest, Wharton County to the far southwest, Brazoria County to the south, Galveston County to the southeast, and Montgomery County to the north. A total of 52 zip codes are represented, with two participants from Minnesota and southern California (not shown on map). The large number of zip code represented the diffuse nature of the vegan lifestyle movement in Houston as it connects to this community of practice, showing the success of outreach across multiple areas across Greater Houston.

There were, however, some limitations to this data and this approach. First, the data was collected at VSOP events, with the majority taken at the monthly potlucks, so this data is therefore not a full representation of where vegans in Houston reside. This map of where survey participants reside is largely a representation of the way in which data was collected (voluntary) as opposed to snowball sampling, which may provide a better representation of the nature of the vegan lifestyle movement in Houston. Therefore, while a high concentration of participants occurs in central southwestern Harris County, this may represent a bias of the way in which the data was collected. However, as I show in Chapter 4, perceptions of distance to vegan - friendly markets and restaurants by survey participants are a useful way to analyze a corporate map of survey participants compared to actual data from the Happy Cow App, a useful resource for finding vegan-friendly establishments in Greater Houston. Further, by looking at race and annual household income data from surveys in SPSS, as well as a map from the USDA Food Access Research Atlas and maps regarding food insecurity and low-income, low access areas of

Houston, I was able to further analyze food deserts in Greater Houston and tie in my own survey data to these conclusions. Finally, it should be noted that Dr. Clune also agreed to share zip code data from his entrance surveys conducted at VegFest Houston 2018, which can be used in the creation of a map focused on the spatial representation of what "vegan-curious" looks like in Houston. However, analysis of this data is best served in a future project.

3.4 Data Analysis, Timeline and Deliverables

First, as I have come to understand my role in this project more clearly, data analysis showed me that I am able to assess *perceptions* of campaigns, strategies and event attendance from the point of view of newcomers, regulars and outsiders, which may inform the client in a beneficial way. In making recommendations according to the ideas presented in this thesis, my hope is to enhance the existing structure of outreach programs, especially the monthly potlucks, which make up the bulk of my participant observation experience. Suggestions by interview participants are also included in my deliverables for the Board to take into consideration. It should be noted that data analysis proved to be a lengthier process than originally expected. Furthermore, as field work and data collection were extended through July of 2019, the beginning of data analysis was also pushed back to August of 2019. Transcribing was an ongoing process, and as I began to upload my typed - up field data to the qualitative data program Dedoose in May of 2019, I realized the complexity of this process. Coding, identification of themes and patterns, and outlines were all part of qualitative data analysis, while entering survey data into SPSS, running statistics and entering this data into GIS entailed quantitative data analysis. Overall, the greater part of data analysis ranged from May 2019 until May 2020, but it has also continued well into 2021 during write-up.

I began the write-up phase of analysis in May 2020 and continued well into May 2021 to

produce drafts. I began the formal process of organizing the thesis into chapters and writing in May 2020. While the literature review actually began in 2017, I continued to gain insight and seek new and updated sources through April of 2021. My second draft of this thesis was a completely different paper from the first draft; the process has been illuminating to say the least.

Regarding deliverables to the client, and as the writing phase of this thesis project evolved, I began to re-evaluate the ideas I had around deliverables. In addition to a written report, I found that a PowerPoint presentation of findings would be useful for the client VSOP. As well, I plan to present a shortened version of the PowerPoint during one of the upcoming potlucks this year (yet to be determined). Chapters Four (Findings and Analysis) and Five (Discussion and Deliverables) should be highlighted as the foundations of the written report, yet I feel these chapters cannot be fully appreciated out of theoretical context which connect them to CofP, the Anthropology of Religion, and the Anthropology of Food. Therefore, this thesis will be made available to the VSOP Board of Directors as well as several participants who have expressed an interest in reading it. I also believe the PowerPoint presentation provides a succinct overview of the entire thesis project, while the short form presentation may also be interesting to any newcomers in attendance.

3.5 Connecting Theory and Praxis in Methodology

In connecting theory to praxis, I chose to use a combination of research paradigms which I thought would best reflect the aims of the project issues around the vegan CofP, religious discourse, and barriers to veganism, especially around ideas of vegan privilege and whiteness. I also hope to best reflect the worldviews held by vegan-curious and vegan participants in this project around the commodification of animals through these research paradigms.

The critical theory paradigm suggests that “truth resides in and is created through

relationships of power," such that "what is accepted as known thus becomes what those in power in a field state or events disclose or declare" (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 63). This paradigm also seeks to bring to light the concerns of the marginalized and the oppressed, which may be applied to issues around race and class oppression tied to ideas of vegan privilege and whiteness, with the idea that culture is produced and reproduced by actors according to histories and geographies, as in Harper's "socio-spatial epistemology" (2012). Further, one may apply the critical paradigm to oppressed and alienated humans and non-human commodified animals caught in the factory farming system. The critical approach also reflects the overall structure of a Marxist political economy framework which serves as an umbrella to the capitalist commodification of animals.

This line of thinking leads to the second research paradigm, or the constructivist/ phenomenological approach. For the purposes of this project, this paradigm rests on the assumption that social realities are constructed through meaning-making within a vegan community of practice. Further, as an interpretive paradigm, the constructivist/phenomenological approach situates cultural beliefs and meaning through belief systems, which is appropriate for exploring religious discourse in the context of a vegan CofP. From a postmodernist and even poststructuralist standpoint, the vegan CofP may be interpreted through the constructivist/phenomenological lens as socially constructed; situated, fluid, negotiated, multivocal and participatory (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 70), which is compatible with CofP theory. Further, the "fluidity" of this approach is well-suited to better understanding the vegan CofP within subcultural and social movement theories.

Finally, the ecological research paradigm explicitly connects the vegan CofP to the capitalist commodification of nature (Castree 2003), specifically animals in the factory farming

system which are tied to greater environmental forces and outcomes, such as climate change. The ecological paradigm is "functional in nature," seeing levels and institutions within a community or society as systematically related to and affecting one another (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 72). One may relate this aspect of the ecological paradigm to the core and periphery of the vegan CofP, as well as to the relationship of the CofP to vegan subcultures and the vegan lifestyle movement, such that if change in the system is induced, it will affect all levels; in other words, as knowledge and awareness around the factory farming of animals grows, vegan society will grow. From a postmodernist/poststructuralist perspective, a combination of research paradigms utilized within an inductive/deductive, recursive, dialectical dialogue served the development of the project well. Finally, regarding positionality, I approached this project as a vegan-curious participant observer and graduate student researcher affiliated with the University of North Texas.

In constructing the research questions, I recalled instruction that "how" questions were sometimes preferable to "why" questions. Therefore, in order to understand "how" vegan-curious participants were experiencing Vegan Society of PEACE potlucks and other events, as well as building a community of practice through discourse, practices, and negotiated meaning, I also found it was important to operationalize "vegan-curious" (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 147-148). Prior to formulating the research questions, I needed to find out motivations for becoming vegan, barriers to becoming vegan, stories and narratives which informed their process, and experiences in the vegan community of practice, as well as affiliations with subcultures around veganism and identification with the greater vegan lifestyle movement. I could therefore operationalize "vegan-curious" through participant observation at the monthly potlucks and events, and by in-depth interviews. The idea of the formative model as a tool of

operationalizing “vegan-curious” has also been helpful (2010, 152), as I was able to better visualize vegan-curious individuals as peripheral members moving in a centripetal direction towards the core of the CofP or choosing to remain peripheral.

Operationally defining and bounding the vegan-curious population (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 160) proved to be challenging for this project, especially with regards to the numerous definitions of vegan-curious, as curiosity itself is a “becoming” state. I surmised to the best of my ability the vegan-curious population entailed non-vegan omnivores, vegetarians, and new vegans within the Greater Houston geographic region. As well, I included the more situated vegan population, or those with several years of more experience of the vegan lifeway as a second population relative to the vegan-curious population. Certainly, one can remain curious about veganism throughout one’s vegan lifetime, though the term vegan-curious most often referred to less-situated non-vegans. The non-vegan experiences are often anecdotal, but they also serve as a third population. Still, the processual and fluid nature of the vegan CofP model leads to a decidedly postmodern understanding of operationalizing the population for this study.

3.6 The Research Population

The research population consisted of non-vegans, vegan-curious individuals, and those who identified as vegan. The majority of my participant observation occurred at the monthly potlucks, and it was at these events that I interacted the most with a wide variety of participants, who I have categorized as follows: founders, Board members and leadership, coordinators, volunteers, regulars, occasional visitors, and newcomers. The founders are Kristen Lee Ohanyan and Tosh Schurz, who also served as President and Vice President from 2004-2020. The Board members and leadership include my site sponsor Dr. Alan Clune and Anuj Shah, who also serves as the current President. The coordinators oversee community relations, volunteers, and outreach

campaigns, while regulars are those who regularly attended the monthly potlucks and other events during the main 14-month period of my own regular attendance. Occasional visitors are those who attended a few of the monthly potlucks and/or other events (who also identify as vegan or vegan-curious) and have been attending occasionally for more than a year. Newcomers are those who attended the monthly potlucks once, a few times or became regulars in under one year. They identified as non-vegan (including vegetarian), vegan-curious and vegan. The research population consisted of a variety of configurations: solo individuals, groups of two or more friends, couples, and families, including small children. Oftentimes regulars or occasional visitors brought newcomers, who may have been family members, extended family, or friends. Further, as I became acquainted with various participants through conversations at the table, I began to refer to them as "table mates," a sort of "sub-population," as I made it a point to sit with different people and different tables throughout the 14-month research period.

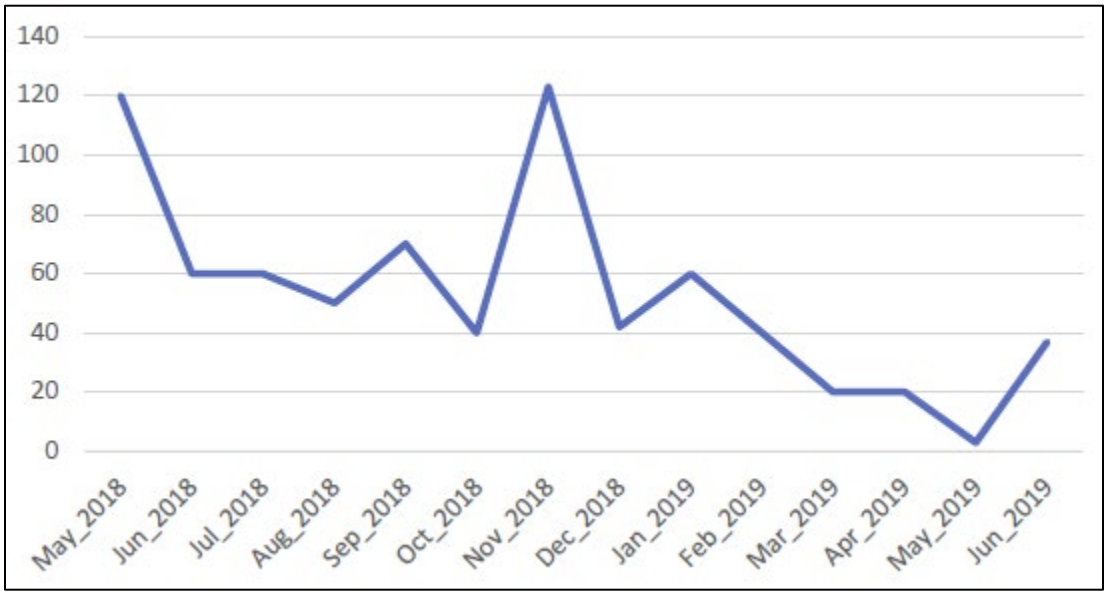
At the Vegfest Houston events, the research population consisted of attendees, which numbered in the thousands; the volunteers, some of whom I knew from my interviews and some who were regulars or even newcomers at the potlucks; vendors who ran the various booths, as well as supportive personnel such as security and film crew; volunteer and outreach coordinators; and members of the Board and leadership. At the "Walk for Animals, Walk for Peace" and Earth Day events, the research population consisted of attendees, sponsors, exhibitors and animal companions. At the Chicken Rescue event, the research population included the sponsor of the event, Tiffany Ballou, along with her husband, VSOP attendees and, of course, the chickens.

3.6.1 Potluck Attendance and Demographics: Second Saturdays Community Events

By looking at the dynamics of how the research population manifested at the monthly

potlucks and other events with regards to gender, race and ethnicity, age, and proportion of non-vegans, vegan-curious and vegans, I was better able to understand the dynamics of the vegan CofP with regards to how newcomers relate to one another as well as to regulars, leadership, and the giving and receiving of the "message" about veganism. Figure 3.2 shows potluck attendance during the 14-month qualitative data collection period:

Figure 3.2: Estimated potluck attendance from May 2018 to June 2019



Notice the spike in attendance at the Vegan "Thanks-Living" celebration in November and the steady drop in attendance from December 2018 through May 2019, with a slight rise in January of 2019. In my field notes I noted that at the March 2019 potluck, which was held at George Bush Park (located in far West Houston on Buffalo Bayou), 20 or so people were in attendance at 4:54 PM, about an hour into the event. I supposed that there were considerably fewer attendees due to the change in venue. Most of the attendees were regulars, with a few young newcomers, and various races, ethnicities and ages equally represented, as well as a relatively equal male/female ratio. It should also be noted that the May potluck was cancelled at the last minute due to inclement weather, but there were three of us who decided to hold our own

potluck. The median number of potluck attendees is 43.5 for the 14-month research period, with the mean (average) number rounded to 53. The range was 3-123 attendees.

Further, I noticed an equal number of men and women at most of the potlucks, which has implications for gender-related analysis, especially around vegan males who are challenging feminine stereotypes associated with veganism. It should be noted that this study recognizes transgender and/or gender non-conforming persons, as well as other gender identity preferences; however, I was not aware of any representation as such at these particular potluck events. Also, related to challenging vegan privilege and whiteness, I noticed a relatively equal number of several race/ethnicity categories in attendance at most of the potlucks: Hispanic, Black, white, East Asian, and South Asian. This is representative of the lack of a racial/ethnic majority in the Greater Houston area (Fig. 1.4), which also has implications for challenging ideas around vegan privilege.

As well, across age groups which range from 18-80, I observed an all-inclusive representation at the potlucks, with some smaller clusters of young people from age 18-25, many of them from Rice University or other universities/colleges in the area. All ages were represented equally well from my best estimations, ranging mostly from late-teens/early twenties to late 70's, with a few children in attendance as well, mostly related to regulars but some in attendance with newcomer parents.

Certain speakers or monthly themes would bring in more representation from certain racial/ethnic groups and even subcultures around veganism, such as VSOP's celebration of Black History Month (February 2019), which included the theme "vegan soul food" with several Black vendors and presenters in attendance. As well, at the May 2018 potluck, the speaker was Dr. Nilesh Kotecha, a South Asian neurosurgeon and vegan advocate, and I noticed that a large

group of South Asian members of his family and friends were seated at the front tables, as well as regulars who identify as South Asian.

With respect to identity/lifeway, at the larger potlucks (N>120) I noticed more vegan-curious and non-vegan non-vegetarian newcomers. At the medium-sized potlucks (n = 60) I noticed a preponderance of vegetarian and vegan-curious newcomers as well as most of the regular vegans. At the smaller potlucks (n = 20), I observed mostly vegan regulars.

Regarding newcomer attendance, which is an important facet of understanding patterns which affect overall participation in the CofP, the following chart shows the average percentage (%) of newcomers (NC) per potluck attendance (#) by month, which I estimated for September 2018 through January 2019, as well as April 2019, from my observations:

Table 3.1: Newcomer Attendance at Potlucks Sept 2018-Jan 2019 and April 2019

	May 2018	Jun 2018	Jul 2018	Aug 2018	Sep 2018	Oct 2018	Nov 2018	Dec 2018	Jan 2019	Feb 2019	Mar 2019	Apr 2019	May 2019	Jun 2019
#	120	60	60	50	70	40	123	42	60	40	20	20	3	37
NC					9	3	30	12	6			4		
%					13.4	7.5	20.1	28.6	10			20		

Interestingly, a higher percentage of newcomers attended the November and December potlucks, which may be associated with the success of the "Vegan Thanks-Living Campaign" in getting the word out about veganism during the holiday season. The median number of newcomers for all events was 7.5; the mean (average) was rounded to 10.7, with a range from 3-30. Number of newcomers was highly variable in proportion to the size of the potluck. The median number of newcomers per size of potluck was 16.7%; the mean (average) was 16.6%. Limitations include missing data from the rest of the potlucks and lack of reporting by newcomers who did not want to be identified in front of the group.

3.6.2 Demographics: Interviews and Surveys

This section is a brief demographic profile of the 32 semi-structured interview participants and survey participant demographics, which further informs research around the constitution of VSOP as a CofP, as well as ways in which it is challenged by and challenging barriers to veganism. I found that this data particularly salient in understanding how VSOP is challenged by certain stereotypes associated with higher income white women. However, age data from both the interviews and surveys is challenging those same stereotypes. Further demographic analysis is included in Chapter 4 Findings and Analysis and Chapter 5 Discussion and Deliverables.

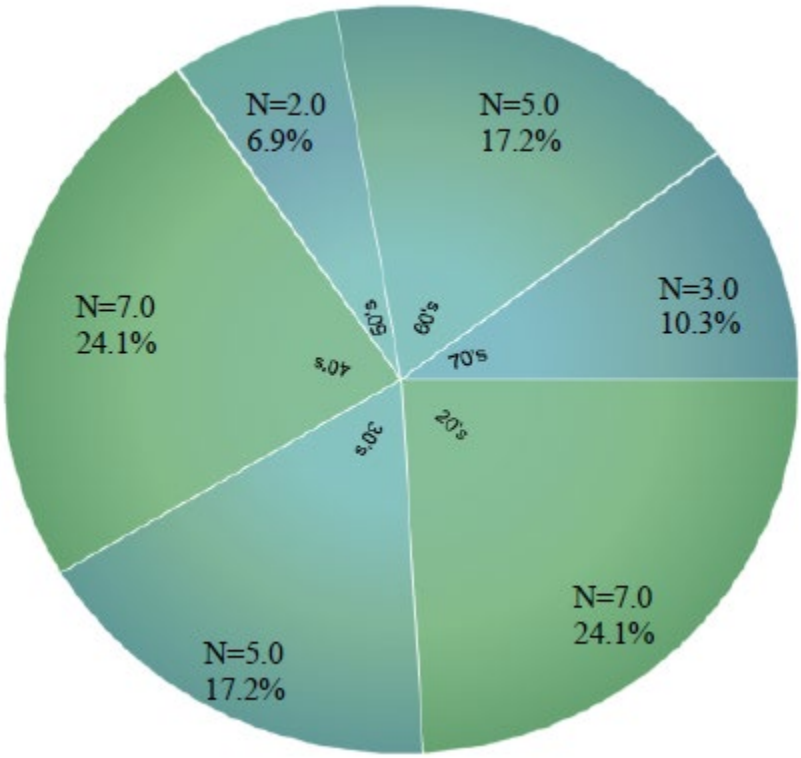
3.6.2.1 Interviews

Of the 32 semi-structured interview participants, six participants identified as vegan-curious vegetarian, five female and one male. 26 participants identified as vegan, nine of them vegan-curious newcomers, with 18 females and 8 males. In total I interviewed 19 females, eight males and two male/female couples, for a total of 21 female participants and 10 male participants. According to race, 21 (72.4%) identified as white, 5 as Black (17.2%), and 3 as South Asian or East Asian (10.3%). Ethnicity was represented by more than half of participants identifying as European American (n = 14) and African American (n = 3). Other ethnicities included Russian (n = 1); Mexican (n = 2); Italian American (n = 1); Indian (n = 2); Hispanic (n = 3); German -Italian American (n = 1); Chinese (n = 1) and Hispanic-American (n = 1). Note that this data is based on 29 interviews, with couples counted as one. Couples shared the same race; one couple differed in ethnicity.

Ages of interview participants ranged from seven participants in their 20's to three in their 70's. Figure 3.3 shows ages of interview participants. Note that the age ranges were fairly

equally represented by participants in their 20's, 30's, 40.s and 60's, with fewer in their 50's and 70's. Limitations to this data include counting couples as one participant, though members of couples were in the same age range. Further, the sample size is small for interview participants, but from my observations this is an accurate representation of the community as a whole.

Figure 3.3: Ages of interview participants in 2018.



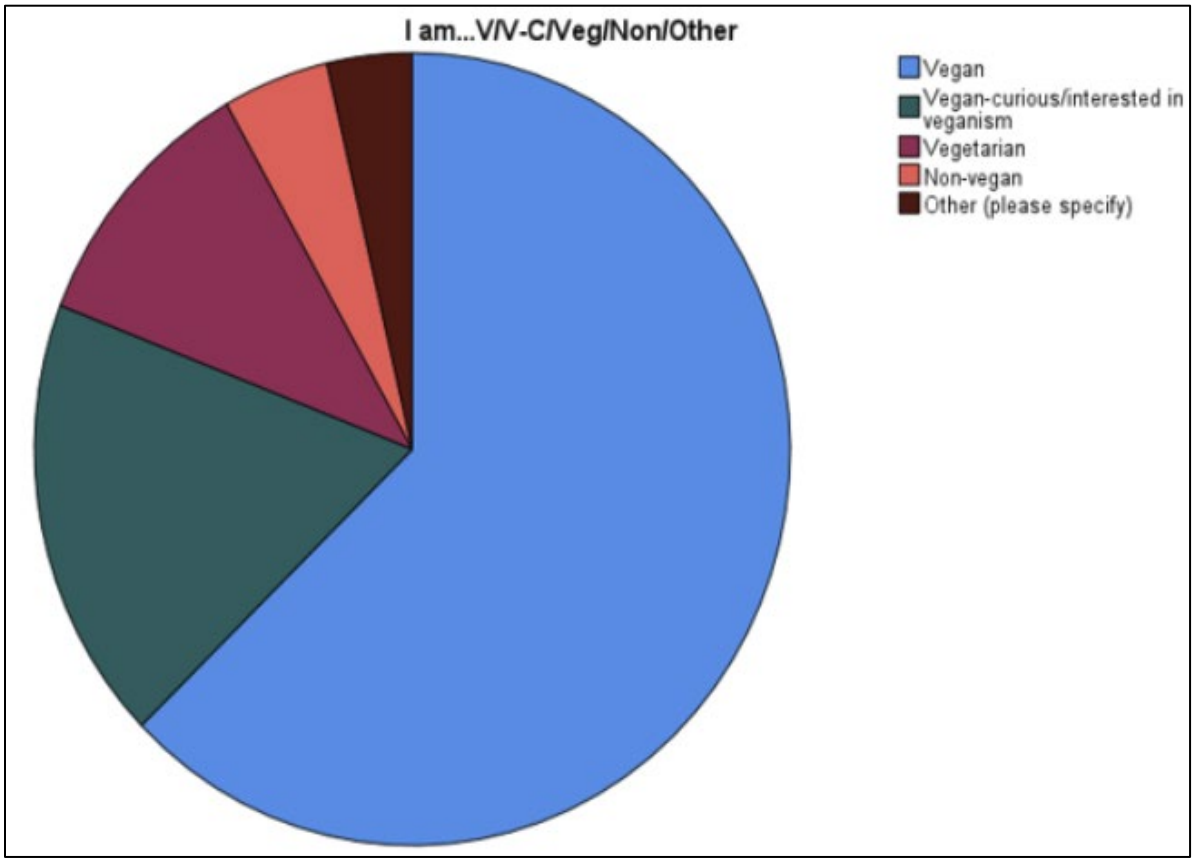
Note: Based on 29 interviews, as couples were counted as one.

3.6.2.2 Surveys

This section details survey participant demographics. First, according to lifeways, 62.2% of participants identified as vegan (n = 69); 18.0% as vegan-curious/interested in veganism (n = 20); 10.8% vegetarian (n = 12); 4.5% non-vegan (n = 5); 3.6% as other (n = 4); with 1 missing (see Fig. 3.4). This data is consistent with interview participant lifeways and, from my observations, community lifeway representation as a whole. It is interesting that so many of the participants already identify as vegan, which has implications for outreach regarding many fewer

who identify as vegan-curious or interested in veganism. In other words, the peripheral members seem to be underrepresented. Further, of the 111 survey participants (n = 111), 40.5% were male (n = 45), 57.7% were female, and 1.8% (n = 2) preferred not to answer. This was also consistent with the community as a whole and has implications for the overall lifestyle movement, as more males are becoming interested in the vegan lifeway.

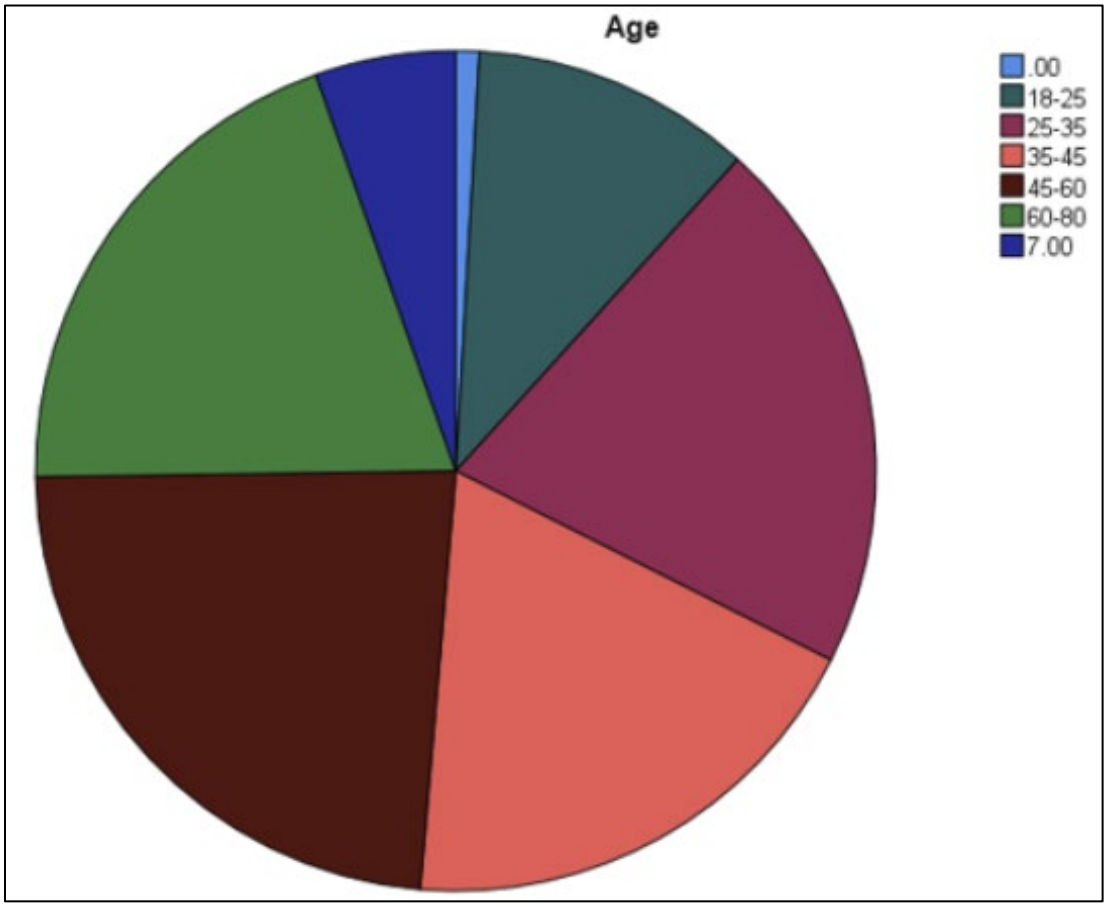
Figure 3.4: Lifeways of survey participants, 2018.



Like the interview participants age distribution, survey participants were evenly distributed across age ranges (Fig. 3.5). The figure shows that 10.8% of survey participants were 18-25 (n = 12); 20.7% of participants were 25-35 (n = 23); 18.9% of participants were 35-45 (n = 21); 23.4% of participants were 45-60 (n = 26); 19.8% of participants were 60-80 (n = 22). There were seven outliers. Limitations to this comparison are that age ranges are calculated differently

from interview participant age ranges, which were generalized according to estimation. However, the similarities in the data are still fairly evident. Also, as this is a larger sample population, I believe it is more reflective of the community age distribution as a whole.

Figure 3.5: Age ranges of survey participants, 2018. Source: SPSS



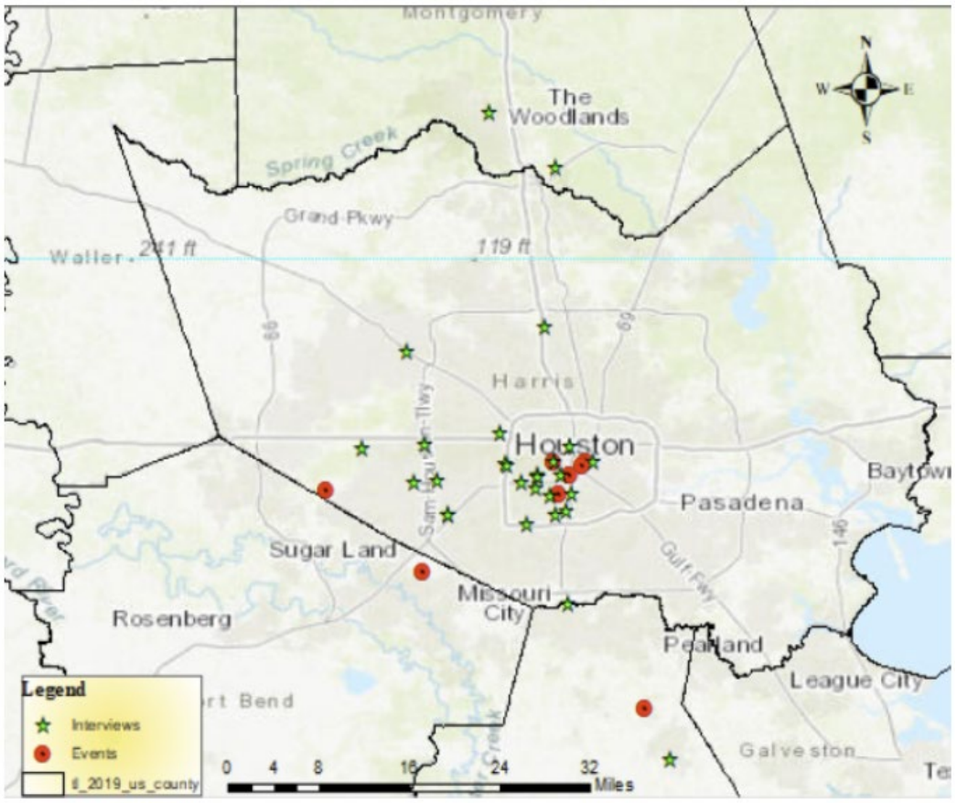
Finally, regarding race and ethnicity, almost half of all survey participants identified as white at 46.8 % (n = 52), while 9% identified as Black (n = 10); 16.2% identified as Asian (South Asian included) (n = 18); 8.1% identified as mixed race/mestizo/biracial (n = 9); and 19.8% did not report race (n = 22). However, 21.6% identified as Hispanic/LatinX (n = 24), which accounted for the unreported race identification. This data was also more representative of the community as a whole when compared to interviews, which has some interesting implications for a more race and ethnically conscious veganism in the Greater Houston area.

3.7 Space as Place: Interviews and Events

Referring back to the idea of socio-spatial epistemology (Harper 2012), I was interested in ways in which the choice of locations for interview by participants as well as the locations of events reflected certain ways of knowing and experiencing "Vegan Houston," from the perspective of vegan-curious newcomers, vegan regulars and core members, especially the leadership of VSOP. This visualization would help me to better understand how members of a vegan CofP are negotiating meaning through space made place, which is also an important part of being a vegan consumer citizen. For instance, many of the interview locations were all-vegan, vegetarian or vegan-friendly restaurants and establishments. Figures 3.6 and 3.7 represent interview and event locations.

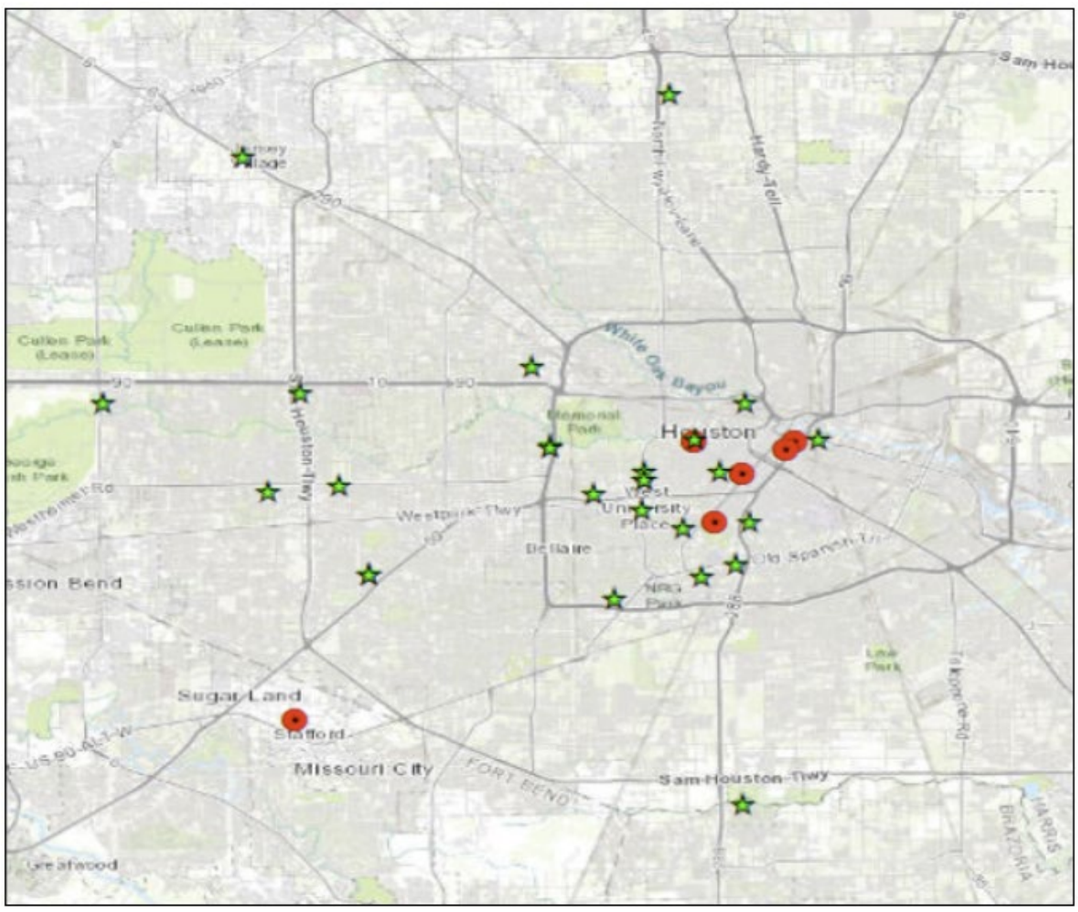
Note the majority of locations are in the central/downtown area and to west and southwest, which are considerably more vegan-friendly areas of Houston. In other words, there are more vegan food options in these areas which also happen to be relatively privileged areas of Houston. Further, the interview locations were the most varied aspect of the project. As interview participants chose their interview location, I travelled south to Pearland and Alvin, all throughout west and southwest metro Houston, and north to Jersey Village, Aldine, and the Woodlands. I met with participants at their place of residence or work, including a hospital, an art gallery, a radio station, and a hair salon; coffee shops and cafes; and from Houston Community College to Rice University. It became evident to me that "Vegan Houston" is culturally and spatially constructed by members of this vegan community of practice, both newcomers and regulars.

Figure 3.6: Map showing interview and event locations.



Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, Intermap, Increment P Corp., GEBCO, USGS, FAO, NPS, NRCAN, GeoBase, IGN, Kadaster NL Ordnance Survey, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community

Figure 3.7: Detail of Map showing cluster of interviews and events in the inner loop and downtown areas.



Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, Intermap, Increment P Corp., GEBCO, USGS, FAO, NPS, NRCAN, GeoBase, IGN, Kadaster NL Ordnance Survey, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community

I also found that events were held mostly in the inner loop and downtown areas, with the "Second Saturdays" potlucks at the Houston Community College downtown location, Whole Foods mixers in the Montrose District close to downtown, VegFest 2019 at Minute Maid Park (downtown), Earth Day celebration at Discovery Green (downtown area), and the "Walk for Animals, Walk for Peace" at Hermann Park in the West University area. VegFest 2018 was held at the Stafford Centre to the southwest of downtown and towards Sugar Land, the March anniversary vegan picnic to the far west at George Bush Park, and the Chicken Rescue to the far south in Alvin. This has some implications for barriers to veganism in Greater Houston around privilege and whiteness, yet it also has some interesting implications for growth in the form of ethnic enclaves located in southwest Houston as well as urban/rural issues around veganism and even food deserts. I engage in further exploration of these issues in Chapter 5.

3.8 Confidentiality and Ethics

An important aspect of this study is confidentiality of all participants. For some, it was important to remain anonymous, while for others this was not an issue. However, to uphold the standards of university protocol and conform to my IRB agreement, I maintained confidentiality for participants throughout the research process, from the field through transcription and analysis to the final write-up. I chose to keep the names of founders, Board members and coordinators, as they are public figures through their running of Vegan Society of Peace operations, outreach and vegan advocacy. Further, they maintain a physical and bodily presence in the Greater Houston area as well as across various social media platforms. However, for the final thesis product (written thesis and deliverables) I did inquire with each of them whether they wished to remain anonymous. For the interview participants, I kept pseudonyms throughout the process, then at the end of the write-up period I contacted each of them and asked them if they wanted to choose

their own pseudonym for the final product (written thesis and deliverables) or have me choose one for them. Some participants delighted in choosing their own pseudonym, while others deferred. I feel this was a great way to further promote solidarity with the participants and maintain communication after a two-year separation from the field when I was engaging with them on a monthly basis.

Another important ethical concern is informed consent. Each interview participant read and signed an informed consent form, which protects them, me the student researcher, my committee chair and committee members, and the university. While the risks for this project are minimal, it is still good practice to obtain consent, as some of the questions around animal ethics do bring up strong emotions of sadness, and outrage. The surveys, while seemingly more docile and objective, also conveyed passionate responses. While no signature was required, the survey participants did read a notice of informed consent before filling out answers.

Finally, I wish to briefly address ethics around demographics, especially race, ethnicity, and age. As an ethnographer, I am aware of anthropology's colonial legacy around racist and ethnocentric belief systems. I distance myself from those legacies, yet from a postmodern standpoint, it is unlikely that I have ever truly and accurately "identified" race and ethnicity in participants from observations, and even when they are self-identifying; I find the process unnerving. However, to better understand veganism in Houston, and especially barriers to veganism, it is important to consider race and ethnicity as part of the overall equation, so I have included these observations with reservation. As well, I am aware of inherent biases which come with "guessing" ages of participants and in no way do I intend to display age-ist tendencies in doing so. Again, the intent is to better understand veganism across all age groups in order to show the ability of veganism to transcend these categorizations of persons to better work towards

the common goal of *ahimsa* for all sentient beings and a more race-, class-, and age- conscious veganism.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Overview of Findings

This chapter focuses on what I learned from fieldwork, including participant observation, interviews and surveys, in addressing the primary research question: How are vegans and vegan-curious newcomers in Houston creating, building, and maintaining a community of practice which contributes to vegan subcultures and the greater vegan lifestyle movement? I begin with my findings related to Vegan Society of Peace (VSOP) as a community of practice (CofP), specifically the three motivations for going vegan in Houston which vegan and vegan-curious newcomers cited most often: "for the animals," for health, and for the environment. I then consider varying forms of membership in VSOP as a CofP, related to Wenger's (1998) ideas of core and peripheral membership and Eckert's (2006) ideas of hierarchical structure.

Common themes emerged as well of specific practices related to creating, building and maintaining a vegan community of practice. These include socialization and learning, volunteering, activism, outreach, testimonials, storytelling, and political consumerism. These practices are the primary link to understanding VSOP as a CofP as it ties into vegan subcultures in Houston, especially around animals, health and environmental activism. As well, these practices serve to better understand the impact of VSOP on the greater vegan lifestyle movement in Houston.

I then consider specific beliefs which give meaning to practices within VSOP as a CofP, with particular attention given to elements which relate to the commodification of animals, namely carnism, cognitive dissonance, and the humane myth. Health implications of veganism relate to the biological myth, and ethical-religious discourse around veganism includes the moral

imperative of *ahimsa*, ideas around enlightenment, the Golden Rule, and prevalent Christian beliefs around veganism. Beliefs which give meaning to practices are further enriched by identity construction within VSOP as a CofP, which are related to "negotiated meanings associated with power structures" (Eckert and McConnell- Ginet 1992, 1995). Identity construction within VSOP as a CofP is further related to lifeway, embodiment of veganism, health narratives, and food aesthetics, which also informs practices as a source for legitimization of the newcomer into the community of practice.

The second part of this chapter considers barriers to veganism within VSOP as a CofP, especially around cost, transportation, social exclusion, misunderstanding, taste, habit, tradition and convenience. I also consider access to vegan foods as a structural barrier and the connection to vegan privilege, with particular attention given to survey data, perceptions of distance to vegan-friendly markets and restaurants, data from the HappyCow App, and the issue of food deserts in Houston. Finally, I consider the food system based on factory farming and commodification of animals, especially with regards to dairy and eggs, as a structural barrier. These findings are told from the perspective of both interview and survey participants, which gives voice to the vegan community in Houston, as well as the animals for which they advocate. By focusing on the emic perspective, these findings set up deliverables which better help the client VSOP understand how participants are experiencing VSOP as a community of practice.

4.2 VSOP: A Community of Practice

VSOP has developed a community of practice (CofP) in Houston around the shared interests, motivations, and passion of vegan and vegan-curious individuals for animals, health and the environment. This passion is expressed in the moniker "Be a Voice for Billions" on VSOP's Facebook page, referring to their commitment to the billions of sentient beings killed for

food in the factory farming system each year. Further, the acronym PEACE, which stands for People, the Earth, Animals, Compassion and Enlightenment, is an indicator of the importance of service to the greater vegan community through the principle of *ahimsa.* As Anuj stated at the May 2018 potluck, VSOP is "100 per cent volunteer – we do it for love" (Observation, May Potluck 2018). Regarding motivations, I found that to be "vegan for the animals" carries its own cultural capital in the vegan community. Gaia (female, 40's, Black, vegan, newcomer) illustrated this point as follows:

> You know, going vegan for health, some people scoff at that in [the] vegan community because they feel like it's selfish. You're supposed to go vegan *because of the animals*. Well, it took me a while to get that part… you know, it was kick started by my health, and then once I realized that there's more to it, *the animals are voices*. It is not fair to them that people are slaughtering and eating them (Gaia, Interview 2018).

With this realization by Gaia, I surmised implications for barriers to veganism, including privileged thinking around motivations in the community, as well as implications for hierarchies around core and peripheral membership, such that peripheral members, or vegan-curious newcomers, might feel alienated by the group if they do initially arrive at veganism for health reasons. However, Gaia's statement also has implications for building community around the common cause, to 'Be a Voice for Billions." With this, I looked more closely at motivations to go vegan, as this would help me to better understand how vegans in this CofP engage in practices centered around these motivations.

4.2.1 Motivations

According to interview and survey participants, the normative implication for VSOP is that motivations to go vegan often begin with health, yet generally prioritize animal ethics over health, environment, religion and other cultural factors. From a holistic viewpoint, I found that the motivating factors are inextricably linked. References to "the three legs of the vegan For

example, out of 103 survey participants who identified as vegan or vegan-curious (n = 103), with only eight participants non-responsive, 82.5 % (n = 85) were motivated by animals/animal suffering; 85.4% (n = 88) were motivated by health/ "for my health"; and 69.9% (n = 72) were motivated "for the environment." movement: animals, health, the environment" are quite common across social media, as well in my interviews and surveys. Interestingly, only 9.8% (n = 10 out of 102) were motivated for religious reasons, yet religious "sounding" discourse was quite prevalent across survey participant responses, especially regarding the belief in *ahimsa* as the motivation to "convert." Religious reasons specifically included 'spiritual growth"; "veganism makes me feel more spiritually clean and connected"; and "Compassion (*ahimsa*)."

Furthermore, in responses to a survey question which asked: "In your own words, what are the main reasons you are vegan or interested in becoming vegan?," I found that participant responses often included references to animal rights, animal suffering, animal cruelty, factory farming, "eating animals is unsustainable for the environment," and personal health. These answers further confirmed for me that the "three legs of the vegan movement" are really the crux for vegan community-building in Houston. I also found that many of the answers to this survey question referred to compassion for animals, for all beings, and for the world. With respect to the moral imperative to go vegan, or "do the right thing," one respondent stated, "My veganism is part of my desire to live in such a way to do the least amount of harm and most amount of good in the world." These "spiritual component" answers further revealed the interconnected and phenomenological relationship between ideas around religion, spirituality and ethics and the moral imperative to go vegan.

I also observed that many of the participants became vegan-curious for health reasons, both young and old but mostly from the "40's and up" category, even due to health

emergencies or health scares (self or family member). However, as participants gained more knowledge about factory farming through their vegan-curious status in the CofP, similar to Gaia above, they began to consider the animals as their prime motivation for going vegan. As an example, Cory (male, 60's, white, vegan, regular) stated that "usually every person that becomes vegan for health becomes more interested in animals and agrees with everything else too" (Cory, Interview 2018). Similarly, Natalia (female, 40's, white, vegan, newcomer) stated her motivation to go vegan includes health and animal welfare in an all-encompassing manner: "Animal welfare is concern for all living creatures, and you, yourself are a living creature, and you need to take care of yourself" (Natalia, Interview 2018). Looking even more closely at motivations within the vegan CofP, I considered what it means to participants to go vegan "for the animals."

4.2.1.1 Vegan "For the Animals"

For many participants, their primary concern is not wanting to contribute to the death or suffering of animals, especially in the factory farming system of food production. Yan-yan (female, 20's, Asian, vegan, occasional visitor) says most vegans she knows are "for the animals" (Yan-yan, Interview 2018). Further, referring to images of animals on factory farms on the internet, Dina (female, 30's, white, vegan, newcomer) stated it was about "seeing the pain, trauma and horror in the animals' eyes and being willing to open up and think about someone else's pain, something I can never forget, and what pushes me right along to eat and continue eating the way I eat" (Dina, Interview 2018).

Survey participants also referred to specific aspects of factory farming, such as learning how animals are handled after watching documentaries which portray the "inherent cruelty of factory farming." Other aspects include what animals are fed (especially in terms of GMO's);

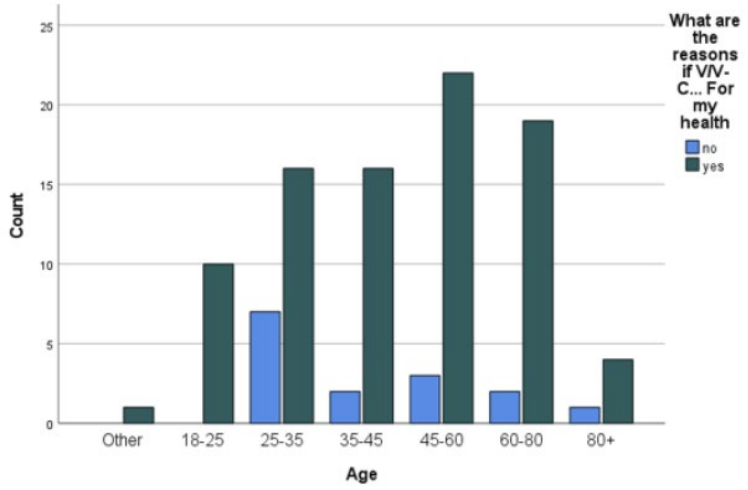
how animals are genetically engineered; inhumane slaughter of animals; belief that "animals are still treated inhumanely even if they aren't slaughtered as a result of using their by-products"; and "the awful truth of the meatpacking/dairy industries." Oher survey participants related the motivation to go vegan for the animals to ideals related to veganism as a moral imperative, namely that "animals do not exist for human use," and "to not willingly, knowingly participate in animal exploitation, which is all wholly unnecessary and has far and deep-reaching adverse consequences."

4.2.1.2 Vegan for Health

Going vegan for health is also an important motivation worthy of further exploration. Numerous participants referred to "lifestyle diseases" and "chronic conditions" such as diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol and obesity arising from what participants believe is the "hyper-consumption of animal products." Included in these findings are also narratives around health scares, either in oneself or a family member. For example, Thelma Louise (female, 20's, Black, vegetarian, newcomer) revealed she has had a kidney condition which prompted her to go vegetarian, and she believes going vegan will be even more curative. She recalled the moniker, "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food," when making the decision to try going vegan (Thelma Louise, Interview 2018). Further, several survey participants referenced health scares, such as one respondent who survived cancer and discovered that "vegan is the healthiest diet." Another survey participant recalled hearing news that "people have become cancer-free after becoming vegan." Other respondents cited going vegan due to a wide range of conditions, including lactose intolerance and other allergies, cholesterol, blood pressure, and an eating disorder. I also considered the health motivation in relation to age, finding that health is important to vegan and vegan-curious survey participants across all ages (n = 103), as shown in

Figure 4.1. The highest number occurred in the 45-60 range (n = 22), the second most in the 60-80 range (n = 19), and the third most tied in the 25-35 and 35-45 age ranges (n = 16). These results are consistent with my interview data, though I noticed more interview participants initially going vegan for health in their 20's, which may speak to health issues in their community, cultural trends, or family of origin going vegan.

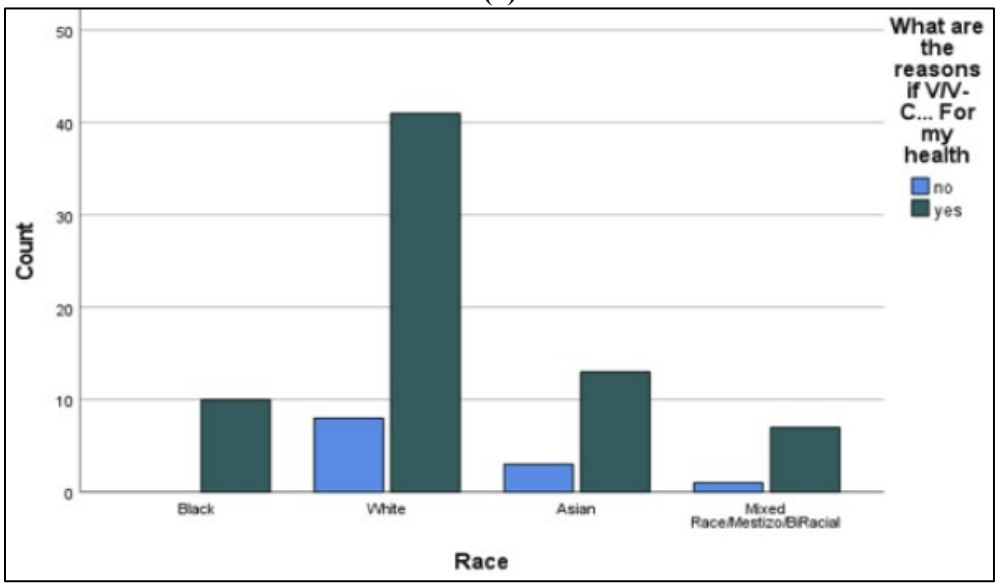
Figure 4.1: Health as a motivation to go vegan according to age categories.



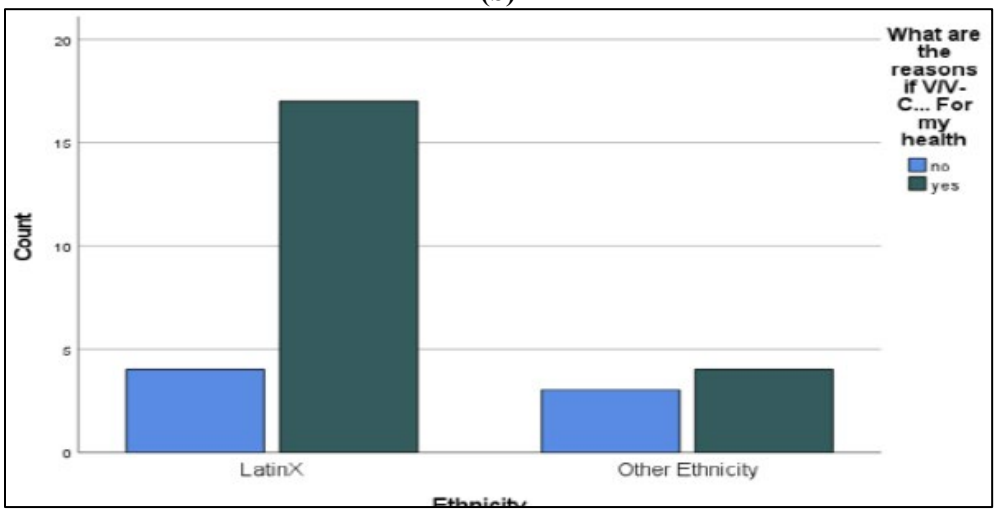
I also considered the health motivation in relation to race and ethnicity, as this was a common theme in interviews and observations, especially around Black and LatinX communities in Houston. Figure 4.2 illustrates the importance of health to participants across all race and ethnicity categories. According to race data (n = 83), all Black participants who responded (n = 10) chose health as a main motivator. I found these findings to be compatible with discussions with Black interview participants and observations, who often referred to community health issues around the over-consumption of unhealthy animal-based fast foods, as well as community-of-origin and kinship-related barriers to going vegan. I also noted that the topic of health and the Black community is prevalent across social media platforms which I followed and analyzed, as well as VegFest Houston (2018, 2019) panel discussions and the February 2019 potluck, which celebrated Black History Month.

Figure 4.2: Health as a motivation to go vegan according to race and ethnicity categories.

(a)



(b)



Further, out of 21 participants who identified as LatinX (n = 21), 17 also chose health as a main motivator to go vegan. Out of 7 ”Other ethnicity” participants, 4 chose health as a main motivator to going vegan, identifying specifically as “Indian” (n = 3) and “Vietnamese” (n = 1). These findings may also have implications for structural barriers associated with race and ethnicity in Houston, especially with regards to lifestyle diseases and ongoing research around food deserts.

4.2.1.3 Vegan for the Environment

Finally, I looked more closely at the motivation of going vegan for the environment. First, I found that many participants believe "environmental consciousness has grown" through veganism, with others expressing that compassion for animals raised for food can be extended to wildlife, plants and trees. As Dmitri (male, 30's, white, vegan, regular) stated, "When the environment is impacted [by factory farming], all animals are impacted" (Dmitri, Interview 2018).

Interview participants who stated their main motivator as "for the environment" primarily expressed concern about pollution from factory farming: land and air pollution; water pollution; water usage for animal farming and run-off from cesspools; the sheer enormity of greenhouse gasses, especially methane, entering the ozone layer from cows and meat production; and impact on the biomass. Further, survey participant motivations to go vegan for the environment were often extended to issues around climate change, human population, and sustainability concerns. For example, one survey respondent stated that "vegan is the only lifestyle that can possible reverse the damage humans have been inflicting on the planet to preserve earth a livable place by all." Another wished to "cause as least pain as possible to the planet." Finally, another survey respondent stated that "eating less meat/reducing livestock agriculture is one of the only individual-level actions that can combat climate change." Having established these three main motivators to go vegan as an important part of creating community, I now shift to ideas of VSOP as a CofP with respect to core and peripheral members, as this further situates vegan community-building in terms of hierarchical structures associated with seeking knowledge about veganism, self-education, mentorship, and normative ideas around "clean eating."

4.2.1.4 Hierarchies: Core and Peripheral Members

Varying forms of community membership are also important to the structure of VSOP as a community of practice, creating a certain hierarchical dynamic. I am interested in this dynamic, as it suggests social and language construction of reality for vegan-curious newcomers which has implications of both barriers and incentives to membership and subsequent growth of the community. With reference to Wenger's (1998) establishment of "core" and "peripheral" membership in CofP's, and Eckert's (2006) focus on hierarchical aspects of the CofP, I found that core membership was comprised of the Founders, President, members of the Board of Directors, Secretary and IT Officer, Treasury Officer, Advisory Board Members, Coordinators, and also included vegan regular members, or those who regularly attended the monthly potlucks. Occasional visitors to the potlucks, vegan and vegan-curious newcomers, and other followers on social media comprised the periphery.

In further development of a core/periphery hierarchy as a model for community-building, I considered Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) ideas around apprenticeship, situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation, such that learning to become a VSOP vegan proceeded in a natural way from periphery to core through practices and negotiated identities. In other words, I considered ways in which vegan-curious newcomers became occasional visitors or even regulars through practices and related ways of "becoming" vegan.

Survey participants identified as vegan (62.2%), vegan-curious/interested in veganism (18%), vegetarian (10.8%), non-vegan (4.5%), and other (specified). Of those who specified their identity (n = 17), there were some interesting responses which showed the propensity for great variation along the spectrum of what it means to identify as vegan or interested in veganism. Examples included "mostly vegan. occasional cheese and eggs" and "90% vegan 10%

vegetarian," "95%," "also vegetarian," "occasionally (every few years)" and "vegan most days vegetarian 100%)." These answers indicated to me that vegetarians in this group may encounter some struggle with their identity as vegetarian in a vegan group whose normative structure demands abstinence from all animal products. This may also be considered a barrier to core membership in this group.

For the regular (core) members, all of whom identify as vegan without exceptions, identity is partially shaped by their shared activities, such as setting up before the monthly potluck event at HCC (Houston Community College) downtown, manning the check-in desk or outreach booth at events, or volunteering for the annual VegFest Houston event. For vegan-curious newcomers (peripheral members), the community of practice represents a place to link meaning with action in the real world, by learning how to make a vegan dish for the Second Saturday's potluck, attending an animal rights protest at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, or attending a VSOP-sponsored meetup at one of Houston's all-vegan restaurants. Finally, VSOP as a community of practice is teleological in nature, as it seeks to perpetuate itself by transforming vegan-curious newcomers into vegan regulars at the potlucks and other events, even regular online engagement as a form of virtual practice. This realization is also important to the argument that VSOP as a community of practice is engaging in strategies of growth which segue into vegan subculture and the greater vegan lifestyle movement.

4.2.1.5 Seeking Community

When seeking information about going vegan in Houston and knowledge about VSOP, especially around a community of like-minded individuals, interview and survey participants engaged in three modes of knowledge transmission: word-of-mouth, friends/family, and internet/networking. These modes often interlapped or created a dynamic interplay within

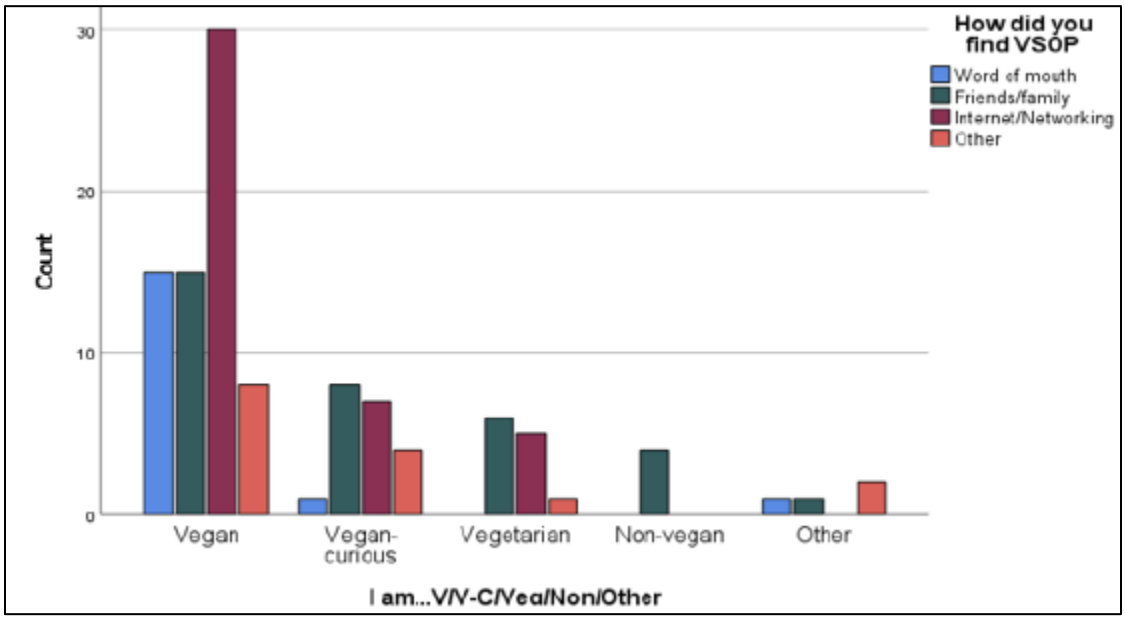
individual experiences. For example, Cory, a vegan regular, recalled that he was looking for other vegan organizations on the internet, "wanting to connect with other vegans," and came across VSOP (Cory, Interview 2018). Similarly, Tanja (female, 40's, white, vegan, newcomer) stated she was "desiring the opportunity to become part of the community and researching on the internet because I wanted to become more actively involved [in the vegan community]" (Tanja, Interview 2018). Other participants who "felt alone" found VSOP in their search for vegan restaurants (Renate, Interview 2018), or by "googling vegan Houston" (Valentina, Interview 2018; Yan-yan, Interview 2018). Some participants may have known individuals already involved with VSOP or following the VSOP Facebook page, while others went to Meetups.com or other vegan pages and discovered suggestions from internet sources or people to look into VSOP. For Thelma Louise, a vegetarian, her internet search to find organizations that were "promoting a vegetarian lifestyle and eating, also led her to Vegan Society of P.E.A.C.E" (Thelma Louise, Interview 2018).

I also found that word-of-mouth transmission of knowledge about VSOP occurred for participants. For example, Manuela (female, 30's, LatinX, vegan, occasional visitor) heard about VSOP when she was attending another vegan potluck in Clearlake, to the southeast of Houston. The outreach coordinator for VSOP pointed her to the Second Saturday's potluck in downtown Houston, and Manuela began making the commute whenever possible (Manuela, Interview 2018). For some participants, word-of-mouth came through family, such as Firion (male, 20's, white, vegan, regular), who initially learned of VSOP through his parents. He recalled they had listened to Vegan World Radio, which listed some of VSOP's events. Other participants stated they found out about VSOP through in-laws or work colleagues.

For survey participants, like interview participants, ways of finding VSOP and seeking

knowledge about veganism occurred via the internet and networking, family/friends and word-of-mouth, with much overlap. Out of 108 survey respondents, I found that most who identified as vegan (n = 68) found VSOP through internet/networking (n = 30). Of the many fewer respondents who identifies as vegan-curious (n = 20), there was a nearly equal number who found VSOP through internet/networking (n = 7) and friends/family (n = 8). For vegetarians (n = 12), five found VSOP through internet/networking (n = 5) and six through friends/family (n = 6). For non-vegans (n = 4), it was exclusively through friends/family (n = 4). However, from the "Other Reasons: Specify" category (n = 15), I found that respondents referred to "also friends/family" (n = 4), "also internet/networking" (n = 3), and "Ticked 1-3," which points to a degree of overlap. Other specific sources for finding VSOP included "accidentally showed up at one of their events," "at Gandhi Walk," "Chef@wrk," "Citizens Environmental Coalition (CEC)," "Earth Day," "gay pride festival," "meetup.com," and several references to "Vegan Festival."

Figure 4.3: Survey results for "How did you find VSOP?" according to mode of knowledge transmission.



These specific answers point to the interrelated nature of the vegan lifestyle movement in Houston with respect to finding out about VSOP. Further, the bar chart indicates that the progression from non-vegan to vegetarian/vegan-curious to vegan in this group seems to increasingly rely upon the internet/networking. In other words, those who already identify as vegan in this group tended to rely more heavily upon the internet/networking when seeking out community, though still relying on word-of-mouth and friends/family to a lesser degree. For vegan-curious, vegetarian and non-vegans, there appears to be a safety component to relying mostly on friends and family to get them through the doors of this vegan CofP. With this information about finding VSOP, I delved deeper into how vegan and vegan-curious participants sought information about veganism through self-education and mentors.

4.2.1.6 Self-Education

Self-education about veganism for both vegans and vegan-curious participants is a high normative priority for embracing the vegan lifestyle within VSOP as a CofP. In other words, vegans in the group, *including vegan newcomers*, generally expected not-yet-fully-vegan participants to educate themselves on the benefits of going vegan for the animals, for health, and for the environment. Veva (female, 30's, white, vegan, newcomer), whom I met at the Chicken Rescue, stated she believes everyone who has the opportunity should be motivated to go vegan and urges people to "do the research":

> I think it just takes enough of an open mind to actually do the research. If they're mad at a vegan for what they're saying, maybe they should just do the research themselves and see. If I go vegan, is it really gonna help the animals? Is it really gonna help the environment? Is it really gonna help my health? Is it really gonna help starving kids across the globe that don't have anything to eat, because the livestock's getting all their food? So then if they do their research, they're gonna see wait, it's not just that vegan's opinion. *It's actually real*. I could solve all those problems and increase my connection with the divine by making one life change (Veva, Interview 2018)

Moreover, Sal (male, 40's, white, vegan, regular) believes that with the advent of the internet, "what took me 20 years to become a vegan, people now see the videos and the impact [of factory farming] and decide instantly they are going to go vegan" (Sal, Interview 2018). Indeed, self-education often manifests for both vegan and vegan-curious newcomers in the form of media sources, such as documentaries, films, podcasts, social media, and videos on YouTube, of which VSOP has its own channel and plays videos, some of which are shown at the monthly potlucks. Two videos which I observed were shown at the May 2018 potluck for Mother's Day, "The Dairy Industry in 60 seconds" and "The Egg Industry in 60 seconds." Other references by participants which served as self-education about veganism included videos of sanctuary animals and farm animals as pets: "So whoever thinks of chickens wanting to be hugged? They do, because they are affectionate, loving and sweet" (Spargle, Interview 2018, referring to a video of chickens and turkeys who want to be hugged).

I also noted that informational videos about the problems associated with meat consumption serve as a form of self-education. One of these is *The Meatrix* (a short spoof film of *The Matrix*) commonly shown at vegan events and educational presentations. As well, many participants also referred to documentaries such as *What the Health,* which focuses on the impacts of factory farming on human health as well as the environment. However, Firion believes social media competition is a problem in getting the message out to vegan-curious people, as "we need to "escape the social media narcissism around being vegan." Firion further believes there are numerous skillsets in veganism and that there needs to be more of a realization that "we are all on the same team" (Firion, Interview 2018). This realization seems to suggest that self-education around veganism for the peripheral vegan or vegan-curious newcomer needs to be considered with a degree of discernment around social media sources.

4.2.1.7 Mentors

Mentorship is also important to many vegan and vegan-curious newcomers who arrive at VSOP with many questions and the need for direction in this community of practice. Mentorship is further important to understanding how newcomers at the periphery seek legitimate participation in the vegan lifeway through forms of "apprenticeship." Some participants stated they look up to certain speakers and presenters at the monthly potlucks, as well as panel discussions at the VegFest events, such as "Ask a vegan doctor," "Ask a vegan athlete," "Ask a vegan parent" and "Ask a vegan" (Observations, VegFest 2018, VegFest 2019). Mentors were also sometimes found through self-education before coming to the group, such as social media vegan activist Earthling Ed (Marty, Interview 2018; Spargle, Interview 2018); celebrity chefs and Instagram vegans like Chef AJ, whose specialty is "no-oil vegan cooking" (Maya, Interview 2018; Hortense, Interview 2018); "Fully Raw Kristina," a vegan raw food vlogger (Yogita, Interview 2018); politician Dennis Kucinich, a progressive vegan who ran for president in 2004 (Hope, Interview 2018; Tanja, Interview 2018); and Bob Lyndon of "Go Vegan Radio" and Gary Franz Young, a regular guest on that show (Firion, Interview 2018).

While authors such as Melanie Joy, T. Colin Campbell, Dr. Will Tuttle, and Dr. Michael Greger were also mentioned as mentors, several participants indicated they were not impressed with celebrities who are vegan, other than historical celebrities like Leonardo Da Vinci and Hippocrates, who coined the phrase 'Let food be thy medicine, and medicine be thy food', which I heard at several VSOP events and interviews. Indeed, vegan doctors have earned a particular kind of cultural capital with vegan regulars, vegan newcomers and vegan-curious participants in the group and serve to legitimize participant devotion to the vegan lifeway. Manuela, an occasional visitor, stated she relied on vegan doctors and doctors who promote veganism, as her

non-vegan and vegan-curious friends who usually brush her off will take her more seriously "if it's coming from a doctor" (Manuela, Interview 2018). Finally, several participants also referred to Dr. Baxter Montgomery, a Black local "celebrity" doctor and VSOP Advisory Board member who promotes healthy living, raw vegan detoxes, retreats, and operates a "Garden Kitchen," as a mentor.

For Gaia, a newcomer, mentors are also vegan regulars at the potlucks, "regular everyday people like us," and vegan vendors at the events. Referring to the four Black vegan business startup owners who gave their testimonials at the February 2019 Black History Month potluck, she added "It's good to hear people's back story of how they got started. I can pretty much listen to anybody tell me a vegan story" (Gaia, Interview 2018). Yogita (female, 20's, Asian, vegan, newcomer) referred to Dania, a vegan regular, as a "friend, inspirer, mentor" (Yogita, Interview 2018), Meanwhile, Hortense (female, 60's, white, vegan, regular) and Jasper (male, white, 70's, vegan, regular) were also mentioned as mentors to several vegan and vegan-curious newcomers. Finally, For Firion, a vegan regular, mentors arrive as people he has met along the way and at VSOP events in his vegan journey: "Because they have a different perspective on the world, this has helped me to broaden my perspective, understand different people's point of view" (Firion, Interview 2018).

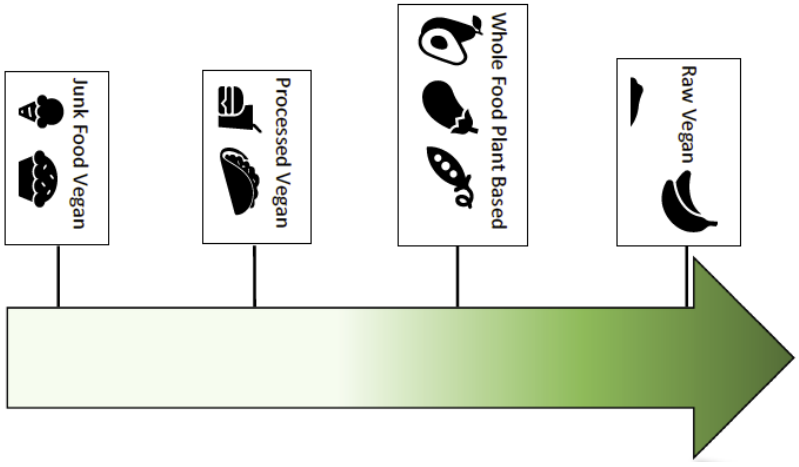
Some vegan regulars state they do not need mentors. For example, Sal is "not a mentor kind of guy. I blaze my own trail." However, he admires others who can have a dialogue with people who are not vegan, or "who are open to the dialogue and not offend people […] those are the people who I look up to. But as far as having a full - on mentor, no" (Sal Interview 2018). Similarly, Dmitri indicated he does not need mentors, as he creates his own mentorship through his website which focuses on the ethical and moral imperative to stop eating animals. I found it

interesting that though some vegan regulars rejected the idea of mentorship, they acted as mentors to vegan-curious newcomers through their participation at potluck events and after-party events. These vegan regulars always showed up to the monthly potlucks and larger events, made themselves available to newcomers, and oftentimes were also volunteers. Overall, I discovered an interesting dynamic interplay between those seeking mentors in vegan regulars, and vegan regulars being available as mentors. One aspect of this dynamic interplay existed in the idea of "clean eating," a normative expectation in the group.

4.2.2 The Spectrum of Vegan

Within VSOP as a CofP, and with respect to core and peripheral membership, I noticed a normative trend towards healthier "clean eating" as members moved from newcomer/periphery to regular/core status. To better understand the normative belief of this group that eating whole foods plant based (WFPB) is superior to processed food vegan, which incidentally draws many newcomers into eating vegan foods, I looked at "the spectrum of vegan." Figure 4.4 shows the progression from "junk food vegan" to "processed food vegan," then to whole foods plant based (WFPB) vegan, and finally to raw vegan, with many categories in between, including food allergy categories like gluten-free vegan and soy or nut-free vegan.

Figure 4.4: The spectrum of vegan.



Many regular vegan participants referred to the need to move away from the more processed vegan foods as they fully embrace the vegan lifestyle, as if the more processed and convenience items act as a sort of "crutch" for newcomers who have just given up animal-based products. For example, when Yogita, a new vegan and newcomer to the group, is out of food or does not cook enough, she stated she ends up eating "unhealthy, high-fat junk or processed vegan food" (Yogita, Interview 2018), which are not the best options. This seems to be an issue for many vegans, who are forced to choose "French fries for convenience" (Tatum, Interview 2018; Valentina, Interview 2018). However, some vegans like Sal, a regular and long-tern vegan, stated he still likes the junk food, "like vegan cupcakes and vegan ice cream made from plant-based milks" (Sal, Interview 2018). Other vegans in the group are "enamored with specialty items" like vegan cheeses made from cashew milk, vegan pizzas, and burgers made with Beyond Meat, which help them not to feel so socially excluded from non-vegan activities. However, Sissy (female, 60's, white, vegan, occasional visitor) is not impressed with one of the chefs who arrived at the February 2019 potluck promoting processed vegan "meats" ready for the barbecue. She asked, "If a lot of the vegans in the group are for the animals, then why would they want to eat anything that looks like meat?" (Sissy, Interview 2018). This is an argument which is echoed frequently across social media platforms related to the group.

The main issue both long-term vegans and some vegan newcomers have with junk and processed vegan food is that it is unhealthy, "full of oil and bad fats," continues to promote hyper-consumerism, or "consuming for consumption's sake," and it "gives veganism a bad name" (Hortense, Interview 2018; Yogita, Interview 2018). I did observe at both VegFests the prevalence of vegan sweets and processed vegan specialty items, especially regarding convenience-type foods such as vegan ice cream, vegan cookie dough, vegan cupcakes, vegan

cinnamon rolls, vegan drinks (alcoholic and non), and other "unhealthy" foods, which may help to draw more vegan-curious people in through sugar and caloric density (Observations VegFest 2018, VegFest 2019). Rachael (female, 50's, white, vegan, regular) thinks many vegan-curious people go straight for the "really sweet or other junk food," including "accidentally vegan items" like potato chips and Oreos, while not even looking at the vegetables (Rachael, Interview 2018).

Whole foods plant based (WFPB) foods include beans, legumes, kale, grains such as rice and whole wheat pasta, and a full range of fruits and vegetables. Cory, a vegan regular, stated he is a whole food vegan for his health but also as part of his activism, an example of someone who says he is vegan and appears to be in "pretty good shape" for his age (Cory, Interview 2018). However, non-processed food can be a challenge for other WFPB participants, especially around getting in all the right food groups, as it is very different from how most people grew up (Dina, Interview 2018). From my observations, most of the vegan regular interview participants embrace a WFPB lifestyle, yet they also indulge in processed and sometimes "junk food." As Tanja stated, "a little junk food never killed me" (Tanja, Interview 2018).

Several participants I spoke to and interviewed like Gaia believe the raw vegan lifestyle is the highest attainable form of veganism, though for many it was only possible on a short-term basis, as in Dr. Baxter Montgomery's raw vegan cleanse, which lasted for 40 days. Hope (female, 60's, white, vegetarian, newcomer) stated that after participating in the cleanse she "felt fantastic and lost 15 pounds […] had lots of energy and got my health back" (Hope, Interview 2018). Similarly, For Yan-yan, an occasional visitor, going raw vegan meant that she had "no negative emotions inside anymore" and felt like a completely new person: "I never felt tired, like the way I do now. I felt like I could do anything I've ever wanted. I felt like I could drive to the skydiving place and go skydive and I wouldn't have any problems" (Yan-yan, interview 2018).

Firion, a regular, believes raw foods are the key to living to 120, “climbing trees not in a nursing home” (Firion, Interview 2018). Meanwhile, Manuela, an occasional visitor, tries to go raw vegan once a week and “do guacamole” (Manuela, Interview 2018). However, going raw vegan may be considered the most challenging of the vegan foodways, as it entails consuming only raw foods which are not cooked, such as nuts, seeds, sprouted foods, bananas, avocadoes, and mushrooms.

At the May 2018 potluck, a table mate referred to raw vegan as a “whole other cultural domain,” which I related to a certain subcultural element to raw veganism in Houston which is centered around two other vegan groups: the raw vegan potluck held in the Woodlands (north of Houston) and the “Plant Pure Pods” meetups. While raw vegan is sometimes even seen as “extreme” by long-term vegans in the group, others promote the lifestyle as a short-term detox which can then be incorporated into the WFPB lifestyle. At the potlucks, I did observe and taste some raw vegan creations, which are basically also WFPB foods that are not cooked. Longer term vegans seemed to gravitate towards making the raw vegan lifestyle a bigger part of their overall approach to veganism.

Surprisingly, many newcomers to the group had already tried raw veganism in the form of cleanses and detoxes. Further, I was surprised that so many vegan regulars, or core members of the group, were still attached to vegan “junk foods” and processed foods such as vegan cheeses and faux meats, when the normative structure of the group appeared to revolve around a more WFPB lifestyle. At both VegFests, the majority of foods available fell into the sweet and processed food vegan category, especially at the food trucks. However, there was also a smaller concerted effort by vendors to promote the more ideal WFPB and raw vegan foodways, as in the following:

Figure 4.5: Microgreens display at the Houston VegFest 2019.

Having established core and peripheral membership as well as hierarchies related to normative expectations of newcomers by vegan regulars, I now turn to specific practices which serve as the cornerstone of the vegan community of practice.

4.2.3 Practices

First and foremost, VSOP as a CofP is enacted through *mutual engagement* in a shared repertoire of practices revolving around veganism. As a social construct, a community of practice is different from a traditional community, as it is "defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 464). Practices which represent common themes in this research include socialization and learning, volunteering, activism, outreach, testimonials, storytelling, and political consumerism. I found that practices also helped me to better understand how VSOP as a CofP fit into local vegan subcultures and the greater vegan lifestyle movement in Houston, especially around activism and political consumerism.

4.2.3.1 Socialization and Learning

Socialization with other vegans and vegan-curious newcomers is an important aspect of "becoming" within the vegan CofP and entails a mastery of vegan discourse, habits, helpfulness, and knowledge about ways to practice veganism. Learning about how to be vegan in Houston is one of the crucial components which makes VSOP a community of practice. With respect to Lave and Wenger's (1991) idea of situated learning (theory of situated cognition) and Wenger's subsequent ideas around apprenticeship (1998), I drew upon ideas from one of the participants, Sydney (male, 60's, Asian, vegetarian, occasional visitor), who believes people are curious and want to learn about veganism when they attend the potlucks. He has further identified three very distinct population that come in: "the environmental activists, the health activists and the animal activists." He suggests VSOP needs to make them all feel welcome, "be part of the group," but he recognized the difficulty in that (Sydney, Interview 2018). I further related these three populations to subcultural affiliations in Houston as a subversion to normalcy around the capitalist commodification of animals within the greater political economy of factory farming.

Socialization in VSOP as a CofP often occurs at the monthly potluck events, where members gather as tablemates to share vegan strategies for substituting ingredients in recipes, such as nutritional yeast for cheese, or how to "veganize" a Thanksgiving creation. Vegan food "hacks," or clever vegan solutions to tricky non-vegan recipes, are also a way to discuss the health benefits of veganism, which often include learning vegan cooking and baking techniques. Further, members share links and videos on Facebook, YouTube and other social media platforms to create greater awareness across the virtual space of this CofP, often referencing the "atrocities" going on behind the walls of factory farms, and some even posting undercover footage obtained through affiliations with animal activists.

4.2.3.2 Volunteering

One of the most intriguing experiences I had as a participant observer during this project was signing up to volunteer at the VegFest Houston 2018, as this helped me to understand VSOP from a subgroup perspective within the CofP. This experience led to a nuanced understanding of the particular joys and frustrations experienced by volunteers, who ranged from teens to people in their 70's, male and female, all races and ethnicities and from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Volunteering in itself is an ambiguous role, as one may not be fully vegan (vegan-curious) but still in the "helper" mode for other newcomers, especially at the VegFest Houston and "Walk for Animals, Walk for Peace" events, where many attendees are non-vegan but joining a vegan-curious friend or relative. Further, socialization within this volunteer subgroup also happened in the break room, where volunteers could sit and sample some of the delicious vegan foods provided for free by VSOP. As well, socialization between volunteers occurred during the activities and duties, such as distributing tickets and entrance surveys, and later in the day at the celebratory group photos, and later when a volunteer party was held at an all-vegan restaurant in appreciation for their efforts.

Volunteering offered a way for many participants to strengthen their vegan resolve. For example, Renate (female, 40's, LatinX, vegetarian, newcomer), stated that the best way for her to maintain her "vegan lifestyle health habits" would be having a [vegan] network of support, so she volunteered for VegFest Houston (Renate, Interview 2018). Further, volunteer experiences occurred at the monthly potluck gatherings, as participants (especially vegan-curious newcomers) helped to set up the check-in table, organize the buffet tables, and stood available for other tasks throughout the evening. Gaia and D'Marco, both vegan newcomers, stated their decision to volunteer for potlucks was a motivator to increase frequency of meeting attendance,

which led to other opportunities over time, such as giving their testimonials as presenters at the February 2019 potluck and eventually becoming regular (core) members (Gaia and D'Marco, Interview 2018).

Other participant volunteer experiences happened at sanctuaries and rescue organizations, such as a "volunteer day at the Chicken Rescue," where our task was to "just spend time with the chickens" (Observation, The Chicken Rescue 2018). Both vegan and vegan-curious participants, some of whom later met with me for interviews, spent the afternoon with Tiffany Ballou and the chickens, beginning with a potluck style lunch, then proceeding to feed grapes and lettuce to some of the residents, who each had a story to tell, often with a sad beginning in factory farming or cockfighting then ending on a happier note as the chickens found their new "forever homes." I was impressed with the engagement of the volunteers as they toured the coops, as this was an experience which brought them closer to the reasons they had gone vegan in the first place.

Volunteer experiences stretched beyond VSOP as a CofP into a form of activism as well. For example, Rory and Valentina (male/female couple, 30's, white, vegan, regulars) stated the best thing they can give to the vegan movement is their *time as volunteers*. Referring to their time at VegFests:

> And we volunteer there, get some cool free shirts, meet people and then we go and spend the rest of the day seeing the festival ourselves, but veganism is not about taking, it's about giving. You know so if we were to partake in a festival that's made for us, I mean people put a lot of hard work and effort into it especially when they are free. How dare us not give of our own time and our own effort at least something. Our best commodity is our time. That's our most precious commodity, our time our energy, our youth (Rory and Valentina, Interview 2018).

Further, Rory and Valentina have volunteered at VegFest Austin and numerous other VegFests in Texas and beyond, which is representative of subcultural activist engagement by younger participants in this group.

4.2.3.3 Activism

Activism, like volunteering, is another key practice of vegans and vegan-curious members of this community of practice, and it manifests in a variety of forms. For example, Gaia believes activism as a vegan "begins on your plate," referring to choosing not to consume animal products. As well, doing the "Walk for Animals, Walk for Peace," wearing a vegan T-shirt, and being vegan is in itself a form of activism (Gaia, Interview 2018). For D'Marco (male, 40's, Black, vegan, newcomer), just saying he is vegan is "revolutionary" (D'Marco, Interview 2018). With subcultural implications, activism also manifests in the form of attending potluck gatherings and participating in the subversion of normalcy around consuming animal products. At the March 2019 potluck, held at an outdoor pavilion at George Bush Park in west Houston, the group enjoyed a "vegan barbecue" while the smell of traditional animal-based barbecue wafted from a neighboring pavilion, creating an oppositional environment (Observation, March Potluck 2019).

Activism in this group also manifests as awareness of and participation in activist groups in the Houston area, which may be further divided into rodeo and barbecue protestors, Bengal tiger and Sea World protestors, circus and zoo protestors, Houston Animal Save vigil-keepers, Cube of Truth/Anonymous for the Voiceless protestors, and DxAnywhere, considered a more radical group by the general consensus of the vegan community. Specific to Houston, protesting the rodeo is a yearly form of activism that some of the interview participants have participated in. One of the group narratives states that "no animal should be used for entertainment purposes." As such, rodeo activists believe that animals such as calves used for calf roping are truly suffering, and they go out to "speak" for these vulnerable creatures. Also specific to Houston, protesting the Bengal tigers that are currently "on display" in the downtown Houston

Aquarium is a common form of activism by members of this group, such as Marty (female, 40's, LatinX, vegan, occasional visitor). Other activism includes building doghouses for underprivileged dogs ("The WoofRoof Project"), setting up at voter registration sites to talk about nonpartisan issues around animal rights, giving out information about no-kill shelters, and protesting the circus (Marty, Interview 2018).

Cory, a regular, stated he admires local activists with Houston Animal Save, which is part of the Greater Save Movement, "bearing witness" as laid out by Leo Tolstoy: "When the suffering of another creature causes you to feel pain, do not submit to the initial desire to flee from the suffering one, but on the contrary, come closer, as close as you can to him who suffers, and try to help him" (Cory, Interview 2018). Houston Animal Save holds vigils at slaughterhouses and at trucks bound for slaughterhouses. In my exploratory research, I was able to participate in a slaughterhouse vigil in east Houston, which opened my eyes to the possibility that this and other activist groups form subcultural affiliations, especially across social media platforms like Facebook. The belief by many vegan activists involved with this group is that witnessing and activism "on the front lines" will change hearts, minds and behavior, extending rights to all sentient beings. Cory also got involved with a local group called "Vegan for Life," an outreach program for not-yet-vegan people which promotes vegan food and social connection and stated he has "hung banners off the bridges and attended vigils at slaughterhouses as well" (Cory, Interview 2018).

In tying activism to the greater vegan lifestyle movement, Firion, another regular, is both an activist and promoter of veganism, hosting a local radio show on KPFT called "Vegan World Radio" every Tuesday from 8-9 pm. Regarding the vegan movement in Houston, he stated, "Vegan World Radio urges vegan folks to take extreme ownership," referring to embracing the

lifestyle and promoting it to others. He also stated he attends protests and vigils, engaging in tabling and leafletting (two common forms of vegan outreach), and volunteers each year at VegFest, all forms of vegan activism.

Further, as I engaged with more vegan activists in the group and listened to more speakers and presenters at the monthly potlucks, I began to make connections between participation in VSOP as a CofP tied to even larger subcultural affiliations, especially with regards to the environment, sustainability, and climate change. Environmental groups include Sea Shepherds Conservation Society and Christian Coalition for the Environment, who maintain a presence at VSOP events like VegFest Houston and the Earth Day celebration (Observations, VegFest 2018, VegFest 2019, Earth Day 2019). For Jory (male, 20's white, vegan, regular), who is also the sustainability director for the vegan group at Rice University where he is a graduate student, his cause goes "hand in hand with being a liberal and an environmentalist": "Voting is also a form of activism." (Jory, Interview 2018). In other words, voting for more liberal and environmentally friendly agendas is seen by Jory to be aligned with a more vegan outlook. Further, from my observations, vegan activism often coincides with other environmental activism, such as Sea Shepherds, who work towards protecting all marine animals (Sea Shepherds 2021).

I also found subcultural affiliations in alignment among smaller activist niche groups around such diverse interests as hard rock/heavy metal vegans coupled with vegan bodybuilding; "straight edge" vegans; food truck vegans; health activists; religious/spiritual vegans; and specific animal rescuers and rehabbers for wildlife, such as SPCA squirrel rescue and other foster programs. For example, Sal stated he is part of the "heavy metal vegan subculture" (Sal, Interview 2018), which I also related to Firion's radio program, where he plays music by all-

vegan local heavy metal and rock bands as part of his activism, such as "The Wheel Workers" (Firion, Interview 2018). Another example is speaker Daniel Austin, "The Vegan Meathead," whose presentation about vegan health and nutrition also included copies of his heavy metal CDs at the check-in table (Observation, April 2019). As well, the graphics on the cover of the CDs reminded me of the link to punk subculture which sometimes espouses a vegan anti-capitalist sentiment (Clark 2004; Sylvestre 2009, 2010). Participants in this vegan subculture further create identity in support of the values of these all-vegan bands which are reflected in the lyrics about wrongs done to animals.

I also recognized health activists who formed subcultures around certain doctors, especially Dr. Baxter Montgomery, which subverted norms around the "need" to consume animal products for health. Further, spiritual vegan activism tie into religious groups such as the local Hare Krishna chapter of ISKON and the Jain Society. Finally, VSOP vegans have the opportunity to visit, volunteer and act as activists on behalf of sanctuaries and rescue organizations such as the Houston Mini-Pig Rescue, a local organization dedicated to the rescue and rehabilitation of abused, neglected and abandoned potbelly pigs. Activists can also include sign up to sponsor one of the pigs living at the sanctuary. Numerous sanctuaries, animal rescue and animal advocacy organizations run tables at the VSOP VegFest, including the Save Movement, The Chicken Rescue, Rowdy Girl Sanctuary, and Friends for Life, a vegan-run shelter for dogs and cats. These also serve as activist sites for volunteers and newcomers to the group.

4.2.3.4 Outreach

A specific form of activism which warrants its own category is the idea of reaching out to non-vegans. This manifests in discourse, spreading and disseminating information about

veganism, and the idea of "proselytizing," or "preaching" veganism. One such common idea revolves around the idea of encouraging others to join the vegan movement. For example, Marty sees the non-vegan world as a "bubble" from which people should expand, "any opportunity they get":

> If it's not for common sense reasons, whether it is for your health or for animals or for other, just because it's something that the world offers and I think a lot of people commit to living in a bubble and they miss out on so many awesome things and opportunities, and I think just on an individual life experience as a whole, I think people should try different things: veganism (Marty, Interview 2018).

But for mainstream society, leaving this "bubble" for some is not that "common sense," as evidenced by frequent anti-vegan vitriol on the internet as well as the reporting of a relatively small percentage of people that identify as vegan in the US (1-2 %), and the prevalence of beliefs associated with non-vegan foods as the central part of the American diet (Observations, "Vegan Sanity – Meat Eater and Vegetarian Discussion and Debate" Facebook group, 2018-2021).

For other participants, even newcomers to the group, their outreach is focused on the health aspects of veganism. For example, Leonora (female, 40's, Hispanic, vegan, newcomer) stated she first introduces non-vegan friends to a vegan dish which she has created and when they ask questions, her goal is to "eventually convince them" [to try veganism]: "If you change, you're going to feel much better because it's healthier" (Leonora, Interview 2018). Conversely, Jory practices outreach by offering sweets, stating he would bake vegan cookies and brownies, bring them to people at Rice University, "feed it to them" and say "Hey, did you like that? By the way, it's vegan." He also liked to invite friends or dates over to cook or bake with him (Jory, Interview 2018).

Further, I considered outreach efforts by the group of vegan advertising through brochures, pamphlets, and the like. These items of print media are found at the check-in table of

the monthly potlucks, throughout Houston VegFest events, and at booths at other events like 'Walk for Animals, Walk for Peace" and the Earth Day celebration (Observations 2018-2019). Figure 4.6 illustrates two examples of the practice of outreach through print media advertising, with one in Spanish: "Se vegano... Piensa antes de comer" (Go vegan… Think before you eat). It should also be noted that print media and advertising tended to focus on all three of the main motivations to go vegan: animals, health and the environment. As well, outreach through print media was often presented in both English and Spanish versions, as well as in the form of specific guides for vegan subgroups, such as the "African American Vegan Starter Guide" shown in the figure.

Figure 4.6: Pamphlets and brochures at VegFest 2019 and the VSOP check-in table promoting a vegan way of life.

Sources: PETA Latino and Vegan Society of Peace check-in display, Second Saturdays potluck event.

Outreach also occurred in the form of proselytizing, or "preaching," which refers to persuading or convincing others to try veganism or "go vegan." I found that there is a decidedly "religious" tone to discourse around proselytizing and preaching, notwithstanding the overt

implications of this speech form. I first identified the term in my interview with Jasper, who sees himself "getting a little more active" in the vegan movement, in the future "proselytizing softly" (Jasper, Interview 2018). In other words, he could be an activist who convinces others "softly" to try the vegan way of life as opposed to "preaching," which often carried negative stereotypes in the vegan lifestyle movement. For Cory, "proselytizing simply means influencing others" and continuing to educate himself, which will in turn educate others about the benefits of veganism (Cory, Interview 2018). Similarly, Jory believes that by living his true authentic self as a vegan, he is "practicing what he preaches" (Jory, Interview 2018).

Sal stated he tries "not to preach or antagonize," but he does find himself occasionally telling people about the health benefits of "doing this and that" around veganism. However, he does not think "bludgeoning people with you should be vegan" is the way to make anybody change. Instead, he says he just emphatically shows them the facts with the realization it is their choice: "I do not think forcing anyone to be vegan is the way to go. I do not want any vegan camps or anything." However, Sal referred to "preaching" to his children as a necessary influence: "But I make them, I sit down, we watch all the documentaries. So, they are aware, and I will preach to them and say, 'You are really making a mistake, you had all these advantages. And you are going to mess it up now'. Sal states he does this because he "cares about their health, well-being and moral compass around animals" (Sal, Interview 2018). As well, for Manuela, with the people who are closer to her like her mom, she has "been more pushy and maybe intransient, preaching to both parents because your parents love you no matter what, so you can be a pain" (Manuela, Interview 2018).

I also found a significant amount of resistance to the idea of "preaching veganism" or "preachy vegans" by participants in this group. For instance, Maya (female, 20's, LatinX, vegan,

newcomer) stated she does not like “preaching to people,” but if people ask her about veganism, she will tell them (Maya, Interview 2018). Similarly, Dina stated she was never “preaching to people or trying to shove it in people's faces.” If they asked her questions about veganism, “Sure, I'll answer whatever they would like to know” (Dina, Interview 2018). For Manuela, preaching is related to changing one’s religion:

> When they try to convince you that what you're doing is bad and you're going to go to hell… if you do not convert, they become upset. However, with veganism, the anger runs deeper as the suffering of innocent beings is on the line, you are harming others. How are you there? You must stop now, like me (Manuela, Interview 2018).

Further, Thelma Louise, a vegetarian newcomer, brought a friend to one of the VSOP potlucks, but stated her companion felt “they were being too preachy.” Thelma Louise disagreed, saying, “All they were doing were just promoting what they thought were healthier ways of living” (Thelma Louise, Interview 2018). Finally, Sydney, a vegetarian, stated vegan outreach should not be “preachy,” but instead give people the idea, "Hey, this is not a bad idea” (Sydney, Interview 2018).

4.2.3.5 Testimonials

Similar to religious discourse related to proselytizing and preaching, giving testimonials about one’s conversion to veganism is an important practice within VSOP as a CofP, as these represent motivation to newcomers that the vegan lifestyle is both possible and the best alternative lifestyle in terms of animal ethics, health and the environment. Testimonials are often given in a more formalized manner by speakers and presenters, sometimes towards the end of the monthly potluck presentation by regular (core) members of the group, and even by some newcomers who have recently converted to veganism. Informal testimonials were also common during table conversations, and when participants would stand and announce their “Vegan-versary” date, not unlike giving a sobriety date in a twelve - step meeting. Following this,

participants would briefly describe their conversion as a testimonial to the ethical and healing benefits of veganism. Sometimes conversion was slower, in the form of several "bartered states" around giving up one type of animal product or one type of meat as part of the transition, or conversion, to complete abstinence from animal products. As some participants gave up progressively more animal products, they extended the "giving up" to other aspects of consumption, such as a taboo on alcohol, smoking and other "unhealthy activities" (Antoinette, Interview 2018; Natalia, Interview 2018).

Sal's separation from animal products began with giving up certain types of meat. In reference to his ethical conversion to veganism, he stated:

> I don't want any part of this. I dropped all the hooved animals instantly. I never liked fish to begin with so that was a no brainer. And then I was eating eggs, and cheese and stuff for a while, but then I thought well this really doesn't make much sense to eat these animals and not those animals. Or not eat those animals but go ahead and eat all the rest of them you like. So, I dropped all birds and their eggs. I decided I'm not gonna eat reptiles and well, you know what? I'll just cut out all the animals. But I still was one of these ovo-lacto people until I made the rationalization okay, birds, eggs, why would I do that? That's disgusting. So, I cut out eggs. And then I became one of them and I never really had liked milk, milk. Just straight drinking milk. So, that was easy, but I did like ice cream, I did like candy bars, I did like all the junk food and cheese (Sal, Interview 2018)

Meanwhile, Veva, a newcomer, suggested conversion should be an organic process of elimination in order to avoid feeling overwhelmed. She "got rid of all meat, but only sometimes had fish" at first. She further believes that once she was comfortable with that part of the "giving up" she realized her body felt better without animal products. She then stated she became more clear-headed and was able to give up all the other animal products (Veva, Interview 2018).

I found that discursive strategies during testimonials also included the repetition of phrases, monikers, and metaphorical constructions such as "crossing the line," "crossing the bridge," "taking down walls" and "taking the jump"; challenging myths and stereotypes about

veganism; and challenging belief systems around the commodification of animals. Other strategies sought to increase awareness of cruelty within the factory farming system, especially around dairy and egg production, which was often directed at vegetarian participants who were trying to give up these products in order to go completely vegan. Analysis of informal testimonials further revealed ideas of a "Green Church" (Gaia and D'Marco, Interview 2018), as well as the use of prayer for animals and for one's resolve to "stay vegan" (Observations, Monthly Potlucks). Regarding going vegan, Veva stated: "I try hard, and I've been praying, to help me to be able to do this" (Veva, Interview 2018). At one of the monthly potlucks, George Matthews the presenter called upon the audience to "Be the miracle for the animals. *Animals are praying for vegans*. 23, 360 lives were saved by vegans in this room in one year [referring to animals that were not used for food]. *We are the heroes!*." Matthews went on to distribute vegan hero pins to each potluck attendee (Observations, June Potluck 2018).

An example of discursive strategies is Natalia, a vegan newcomer, who referred to "making connections" about the reality of factory farming as opposed to "disconnection" with where food comes from:

> I think I was watching a veterinarian reality show, Dr. Pol. There was a woman's pet pig, or hog that she had been [...] I guess it through 4H or something or other and if it did not take, she was going to send him off to slaughter. This hog was also her pet, but I was just *amazed at the disconnection*, that she had. They did a close-up on this, animal's eyes and close-up, those eyes look human (laughs). I could not believe all the emotion. I think I had prepped myself for just, kind of *crossing over that line of the dissonance* to actually being aware and realizing how absolutely crazy and psychotic (laughs) the animal eating industry is and how we view other human beings [...] yeah it was *like being hit with a ton of bricks*. I will have to say it was a gradual process and then all of a sudden it just *exploded*. There was no going back after that, as it was emotional, and it was *eye opening*.

For Natalia, "crossing the line of cognitive dissonance" around consuming animal products also meant "separating herself from all the cruelty inflicted on animals":

> [I was] *taking that jump* from where I was not just plant based but I knew that I would never, ever consume another animal product again…[others] jump into [veganism] full speed ahead, but if they don't make that jump over cognitive dissonance, they were only calling themselves vegans without having the ethical conversion (Natalia, Interview 2018).

Further, as an agnostic, Natalia stated she believes most people seek veganism out to find purpose of being and existence, and to understand something that can bring "peace and joy in a confusing world, an opportunity to be part of something bigger than oneself. *It is almost a religion in that respect, don't you think?"* However, Natalia believes that if she had only focused on herself and her health, she does not believe she would have experienced what she calls "a true conversion to ethical veganism," as it had to be something bigger than herself to give it more purpose. Finally, Natalia likened the conversion to veganism to the "floor dropping out" from under her as she "changed religions":

> All of it is like a conversion, yeah. It can be traumatic. I think that is why it is so hard for people to even embrace the vegan lifestyle because they have to admit that their current and previous lifestyle has been wrong. You mourn it, and you mourn the way you used to think and, the way you used to see your world. It is almost like *the floor, your floor, drops out from underneath you* in many ways. It is, it is like changing your religion. (laughs).

Sometimes vegan regulars recalled in their testimonials how they were impacted by documentaries, films and videos about animals in factory farms which prompted their ethical conversion to veganism. For Sal, it was the documentary about the chicken coops that made him go vegan:

> Huge, industrial chicken coops with just animal, on top of animal, on top of animal. Disease and filth. You can see the whole clipping their beaks, you can see the suffering. And there is nothing that is good is going to come from that.

Another example is Hortense, who declared it was the documentary *Forks over Knives* which "walloped her" and "made her go vegan":

> Then, one day, I was at home alone and for some reason, I stumbled across the film *Forks Over Knives*. Usually, my husband and I watch films together, so I watched *Forks Over Knives* and I just [...] I mean, that's when I just on the spot, I turned vegan instantaneously and then, I made Jasper watch it and he didn't come along as fast, but you'll find out that he's onboard now. He just came along a little slower. This film has converted more people to veganism than any other film.

For Cory, who also watched *Forks over Knives*, it suddenly became clear that he "could be healthier, that veganism is better for the environment, and it's kind to animals," so he just decided he had to become vegan: "And that was it" (Cory, Interview 2018). Similarly, Valentina recalled watching another documentary, *Cowspiracy*, and deciding to go vegan immediately:

> So, I was just glued to television and I cried, and I laughed, and I was like, how can I watch this and not do something about it. And I was like, 'I'm on board.' And that day I cleaned out our whole pantry we got boxes from the garage, I cleaned it out, I took out everything. A lot of it was totally, we had just gone to the grocery store. So much food, we threw away all of our barbecue stuff.

Testimonials also refer to strategies which participants use to stay vegan. For Spargle (female, 70's, white, vegan, newcomer), the transition from vegetarian to vegan was based on images getting "burned in her mind, which is far different than reading about it or even being told about it":

> I would put an image in my mind of some of the horrific cruelty I have seen. Not personally, but from film, documentaries, and from PETA does a lot of undercover work and they put it on Facebook. And when you see those images, and when you read about it, for me, it was just impossible [to continue consuming animal products].

Similarly, Rachael recalled "shocking" movies about animal farming. When she was tempted to eat animal products, she stated she would "have the visions of those movies and seeing what they were doing to the animals; that keeps me strong" (Rachael, Interview 2018).

4.2.3.6 Storytelling

In further exploring discourse around animals, I found that motivation to convert to vegan resides in the practice of storytelling about pets and other animals, especially from childhood. I

found that for many participants, there was an existential trauma around witnessing the killing of animals in childhood, or witnessing one's own family member slaughter a chicken, pig, or lamb. In some cases, as a child, the participant even befriended the doomed animal, and a sense of shock and horror overcame the speaker as the child-self re-experienced a life that was suddenly and incomprehensibly terminated. Yet, a resolve not to harm animals persisted in these participants, a precursor to the conversion to veganism over the period of many decades. An example is D'Marco, who told me a story about his grandfather raising pigs and cows for food:

> My grandfather used to raise pigs and cows. And that was, I mean, that was pretty much the extent of the business. He would tell me, 'I'm raising pigs and he's going to be bacon one day.' You know? And I'll never forget, I would go out there, and I would play with them and you know, be riding them and everything. And he'd be like, 'Sweetie, get off that pig.' And I'm like, you know, he's my friend. But then again, I know in a couple of weeks, he's going to kill him.

D'Marco recalled his grandfather one time actually going out to slaughter a pig, and it "jacked him up": "Because I was like 'You're really going to kill him.' You know? It's just, it does something to you. It's something that you can't get out of your head." (D'Marco, Interview 2018). Similarly, Maya also had a pet pig as a child, and she recalled feeling "heartbroken" when she found out the pig had been sold for money. She stated this same compassion which made her go vegan was always in her (Maya, Interview 2018). There were numerous other stories of animals, and I am grateful for the opportunity to listen to such candid narratives related to reasons for conversion to ethical veganism by participants.

Another facet of storytelling by participants in the group is the belief in animal kinship, animal sentience, and animal spirituality. For Gaia and D'Marco, veganism relates to animals as kin, as "we are all children/siblings of and under God, however one chooses to see the supreme being" (Gaia and D'Marco, Interview 2018). In reference to speciesism, Gaia added, "How can you have pet parrots or parakeets, but you eat chicken? That's their cousin" (Gaia, Interview

2018). Further, D'Marco stated being motivated to go vegan by animals involves seeing animals in a different light, or "having a bigger affinity of animals": "I love pigs, and I'll tell my mom, she'll be like, 'hey, a pork chop'. But you're eating a pig? What did he do to you?" (D'Marco, Interview 2018). As Cory stated, "I can have faith that I am right with the universe if I am right with the animals" (Cory, Interview 2018). For Maya, the spiritual aspect played a part in her motivation to go vegan: "It started off as health reasons, and then environmental reasons, which is a spiritual reason as well. I believe we all have a soul and so does a cow. A whale cries when her baby dies" (Maya, Interview 2018). For Dina, who wants to "save the animals by going vegan," the kinship aspect of animals is like a dialectic for creaturely connection. "not hurting animal families just for consumption brings human families closer together. We are all creatures. We are all worthy of divine love, *agape love*" (Dina, Interview 2018).

4.2.3.7 Political Consumerism

Vegan political consumerism as a practice which participants believe confronts animal cruelty and suffering within the factory farming system. It is also considered by participants to rest upon supply and demand plus accessibility. In other words, as fewer people buy meat and other animal products, the industry responds by breeding and killing fewer animals (Dmitri, Interview 2018). For some participants like Tanja, the best way to "change the world is to change herself," which ties into the greater vegan lifestyle movement:

> Living in a capitalist society as we do, I feel like the best thing that I can do is to vote with my purchases and with my lifestyle and to not participate in the things that I think are wrong, which sends a message to the market: what I'm willing to buy or what I'm willing to purchase will either increase or decrease demand.

Further, Cory believes political consumerism is understood as "vegans making a concerted effort to not consume animal products or buy products made from animals, such as leather and wool. It is no longer necessary to buy such products since there are good alternative [vegan] products on

the market" (Cory, Interview 2018). However, Sal stated he will not get rid of non-vegan products that he already has, such as a leather couch he has had for 30 years, but he will not purchase any new items which contribute to "the death industry" (Sal, Interview 2018).

Political consumerism is also a form of activism for many participants, a bottom-up consumer-driven approach. However, Dmitri stated there was a limit to continually trying to improve his political consumerist stance, as it was not helping the animals at a certain point:

> I think there's a well of diminishing returns. Once you stop consuming animal products, when you don't buy meat, eggs, dairy, you don't wear leather, you don't buy wool, all the other things. I really don't think you need to keep trying to improve. One, there's marginal returns on trying to find some other tiny thing. It doesn't do animals any good. I do try to avoid all animal products in terms of my food. But in terms of things like a bicycle tire, and I do ride bicycles, I don't think trying to improve it and trying vegan bicycle tires, that's not the way to help animals. That's not something that's contributing to the slaughter of animals.

Similarly, Maya pointed out that veganism is a way of life that affects everything she buys; however, she is also aware of the argument that "the animal is already dead, so what does it matter?" (Maya, Interview 2018). Some participants also stated they were conflicted regarding honey and other bee-derived products.

Political consumerism is also related to other causes, such as helping the environment. For example, Thelma Louise, a vegetarian, stated she has met a lot of people who are vegans, and because of their environmental concerns, such as the meat and dairy industry contributing to air pollution, she has changed what she chooses to eat and believes this will "affect the environment in a small way, but I think it still counts" (Thelma Louise, Interview 2018). Another cause is supporting vegan-run businesses, especially all-vegan restaurants. Firion stated that when he does eat out, he wants to support a business that "puts their values out front" (Firion, Interview 2018). Jory stated he prefers to exercise political consumerism by cooking at home instead of eating out, as he is quite frugal and does not want to waste food. He does, however,

believe in supporting vegan businesses, like the Vegan Cupcake Girl, where he will "go ahead and buy her three-dollar cupcake," but this is a rarer occurrence (Jory, Interview 2018).

In relating the practice of political consumerism to the greater vegan lifestyle movement, the "veganized" political economy also takes advantage of political consumerism, especially through marketing and advertising of vegan goods. Vegan T-shirts, clothing, beauty goods, household cleaning products, and a plethora of other items have heavily populated stores and the media in the last several years since the beginning of this project, and it is only growing bigger (Observations 2018-2019). Even in the pet industry, vegan political consumerism is on the rise, with items like vegan or plant-based dog treats and foods. Further, the Earth Day celebration, sponsored in Houston by Green Mountain Energy Company in partnership with Citizens' Environmental Coalition, serves as an attestation to the power of neoliberal partnering between corporate and non-profit groups. The website states: "Earth Day Houston offers your organization an outstanding opportunity to present your products and mission to the rapidly growing green market at Houston's largest celebration of Earth Day" (Earth Day Houston, 2021). This "greening" of the political economy through vegan political consumerism results in higher demand for vegan and vegan-related products, while continuing to drive down demand for non-vegan industries, such as the dairy and meat industries. At VegFest Houston, there is even a vegan travel agent offering all-vegan journeys (Observations, VegFest Houston 2018; VegFest Houston 2019). For an alternative critique of consumerist approaches, see 4.3.10 More Structural Barriers: Hyper-Consumerism.

Participants often referred to all-vegan restaurants as a focal point for meetups, social inclusion and challenging the normative ideas in Houston around the traditional barbecue joints and steakhouses. Further, all-vegan food trucks are a prevalent fixture across the Houston

landscape, with favorites such as vegan cauliflower wings (Houston Sauce Co.) and plant-based burgers from the "Edgy Veggy" food truck. Pop-ups like Veegos, which serves vegan Mexican food, become food trucks, then finally build brick-and-mortar establishments (Chandarana 4 September.2019). RayJay's Feel Good Food," a vegan barbecue truck, was established to "appeal to the flavors of a nonvegan… that starts the conversation." Further, vegan food is viewed "not so much as a type of cuisine as it is a qualifier: vegan soul food, vegan Asian food, vegan baked goods, and vegan Mexican food," with many vegan businesses in Houston "helmed by people of color, and most of them are Black-owned." Even as recently as 2009, Sinfull Bakery owner Dylan Carnes states there was "little to no vegan scene in Houston"; yet in 2019, a "stream of cars" outside Korny Vibes, which serves vegan burgers, sandwiches and Mexican staples, in the Montrose District prove otherwise. (Balter 28 July.2020). The "vegan scene" in Houston has thus thrived due to political consumerist practices.

Having considered some of the main practices which serve to build community and tie into the greater vegan lifestyle, I now turn to beliefs and identity construction within VSOP as a CofP.

4.2.4 Beliefs

In reference to Wenger's (1998) "key characteristics of a community of practice," I considered beliefs in the context of "a shared discourse that reflects a certain perspective on the world" (130-131). I found it important to consider some of the most common and widely held beliefs by participants in this vegan CofP, as these serve to unify the group and ultimately contribute to cohesion and better outreach strategies, which in turn feeds directly into the greater vegan lifestyle movement in Houston. These beliefs focused on mindsets around the commodification of animals, alienation from one's food, myths and counter-myths, vegan

stereotypes, and discourse around veganism as a moral imperative, which included ideas from Christianity, as well as ideas from Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and especially regarding the principle of *ahimsa*.

4.2.4.1 Carnism

Carnism is a concept which I encountered on a regular basis in interviews during field work, in literature and on the internet. I was first introduced to the concept of carnism, or the invisible belief system that conditions people to eat certain animals (Joy 2020), in my exploratory research. Carnism is considered by many in the group as the opposite of veganism and *ahimsa.* Further, in an interview, Firion commented on the powerful nature of carnism: "It is a very prevalent social and monetary force derived from animal exploitation, use, and ownership of animals which commonly refers to nutritional prevalence of relying on these substances [animal products]." Firion and other participants believe that in order to change carnist norms, one must understand the "integral forces," which refers to ways in which the political economy of factory farming affects consumers. They also believe carnism hurts people who work in the factory farming industries, oftentimes "marginalized people, very vulnerable people, who are forced to work in slaughterhouses and fishing operations, hunting, et cetera" (Firion, Interview 2018). In other words, Firion suggests we must not exclude humans from our understanding of non-vegan forms of oppression, which in carnism exploits the vulnerable [animals and humans employed by carnism] and robs them of agency.

As stated in the website "Beyond Carnism": "To understand carnism is to also address other forms of systematic oppression in the animal industrial complex (factory farming): racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism, as the mentality that enable the oppression is the same." To further understand carnism in terms of negotiated meaning within VSOP as a CofP, I considered that

interlocutors understood carnism as surviving by *validating* itself and weakening, or *invalidating*, the system that challenges it, which is veganism (Beyond Carnism 2021). In other words, participants often referred to carnism as the ideology which vegans are up against and need to challenge by validating vegan practices and beliefs. This also has implications for community-building practices, especially political consumerism, as an ethical stance against the ideology of carnism.

4.2.4.2 Cognitive Dissonance

Related to the concept of carnism is the idea of "cognitive dissonance," which in the context of this project means that some vegan participants believe that non-vegans (including vegetarians) are aware of "atrocities" happening in factory farms, yet they choose to disassociate from this knowledge in order to continue consuming animal products. In this respect, cognitive dissonance allows carnism to validate itself while weakening its systemic opponent, namely veganism. According to some participants, the belief in cognitive dissonance around the consumption of animals is directly related to mass production of animals in factory farms in the United States. Interestingly, this insight did not seem to translate into an anti-capitalist critique or challenge implications of political consumerism, yet it does show how beliefs within the context of the vegan CofP connect participants to practices which challenge larger ideological norms in society. As Hope recalled, when she ate meat, it was easier to do here [in America], "because you don't see the bodies of animals hanging. So, you just separate yourself from it. It's just things wrapped in plastic" (Hope, Interview 2018). Sal believes cognitive dissonance in this respect is a complete disassociation from the industry where the food comes from: "You just get a chicken McNugget or hamburger… you don't think oh that was a cow. This promotes desensitization to the harms inflicted on animal bodies and lives and leads to a lack of

compassion and caring which leak out into every aspect of life" (Sal, Interview 2018).

Yet, other participants believe people are aware now more than ever of where their products are coming from, "but they are not making the connection to the living, sentient creature that wants to live its own life. There is a huge disconnect when it comes to food. Non-vegans do not want to know the whole process that creates the product. This lack of knowing inflicts violence, immense torture" (Spargle, Interview 2018).

4.2.4.3 The Humane Myth

Some participants believe the factory farming industry contributes to cognitive dissonance through the "humane myth," which refers to the story that corporate producers and advertisers tell consumers about animal welfare in factory farms. Core and regular members as well as many newcomers believe that these lies are told to in order to maximize profit at the expense of animal welfare. Ideas around "free-range" and "grass-fed" were often discredited by both vegan and vegan-curious participants who stated they were wary of believing propaganda in service to factory farming. Indeed, the belief follows that humane conditions do not exist at all for animal raised for food. As a response, participants formulated counter-myths in order to disprove the humane myth, so that what they believed to be certain truths and facts about the reality of continued unnecessary suffering of animals takes precedence over the prevalent economically motivated humane myth. In this respect, the counter-myths empower vegan political consumers yet do not challenge capitalism. Further, counter-myths aid in overcoming barriers related to cognitive dissonance and extra-explanatory justifications for *not* making all animal products a thing of the past. For example, Gaia shared about documentaries she had seen in relation to the human myth: "I saw how cows are led to slaughter and how they're panicking and how somebody came up with a way to make it more humane. It's not humane. In the end,

they're going to die. They know that they're going to die. And it's not fair to them. You know?" (Gaia, Interview 2018).

In Figure 4.7 the "expectations" are that dairy cows and egg-laying hens are being humanely treated. VSOP vegans in solidarity with large non-profits like PETA and Farm USA contribute to the larger vegan lifestyle movement by showing "reality" and the "truth" about conditions for dairy cattle and egg-laying hens, who are sent to slaughter as soon as they are no longer productive: the "spent hen" (Observations 2018-2019).

Figure 4.7: Two pamphlets representing vegan counter-myth around humane eggs and dairy.

Sources: peta2.com and farmusa.org.

4.2.4.4 The Biological Myth

Some vegan participants believe the "biological myth" states our species must have meat to function normally. The biological myth is also related to the carnist ideology which seeks to

invalidate veganism through the three N's: that eating meat is normal, natural and necessary (Beyond Carnism 2021). Regarding evolution, Dmitri's counter-myth to "humans need meat to survive" is that it is unethical to kill and consume animals (Dmitri, Interview 2018). Participants believe that in reality, the food industry lobbies have created this narrative as an economically motivated myth. One idea which vegans seek to disprove is that "our canine teeth prove we are meat-eaters"; the vegan counter-myth states we have the flat teeth and intestines of herbivores. As well, a common vegan belief draws upon evidence of other muscular plant-eating animals, such as gorillas and horses, which proves that plants are a great source of protein. I noticed this was also a popular advertisement on vegan T-shirts which were sold at the check-in table of the monthly potlucks (Observations, Monthly Potlucks 2018-2019). Rachael believes that if apes survived on fruits and vegetables, and we evolved from them, then it would follow that humans survived on them as well (Rachael, Interview 2018).

The biological myth also asks rhetorically: What do you do for protein? You only get protein from meat. The counter-myth states: Plant-based protein is more than enough. As Leonora stated, "Kale has more protein than meat" (Leonora, Interview 2018)). Further, stereotyping of vegans as "weak" usually has to do with protein and vitamin B-12. Participants believe these stereotypes "need" to be true for non-vegans and even for some vegan-curious/vegetarian individuals who are not ready to commit to going completely vegan. I witnessed the stereotypical discourse around vegan "weakness," or physical well- being compromised by a lack of protein and other nutrients, especially B-12, in abundance on the internet. However, as with the humane myth and counter-myth about reality and truth, vegan counter-myths to the biological myth were also prevalent (Observations, 2018-2019). Manuela had heard, "You are going to die if you go vegan… lack of vitamins and B-12 are going to affect

your nervous system." However, after eight years of being vegan, Manuela stated she felt better than ever before (Manuela, Interview 2018). Rachael described the issue is B-12: "When the animals graze, they get the dirt, and they get their B-12, and we don't. Now, way back when, when we didn't wash everything, we would probably get the B-12 as well" (Rachael, Interview 2018). Vegan-curious and vegan participants also often found themselves defending the right *not to eat meat* for protein. For Yogita, this idea was related to the stereotype she personally had to deal with, which was the idea that "vegans appear malnourished" (Yogita, Interview 2018). However, Maya pointed out that in the media, vegan athletes abound (Maya, Interview 2018). Indeed, my observations include social media accounts, posts and discourse around how athletes are going vegan, even football players, and especially bodybuilders with Instagram accounts (Observations, 2018-2019). Moreover, Firion pointed out that many myths about "the need for animal protein" have been upheld by medical professionals, especially M.D.s, yet vegan physicians such as T. Colin Campbell shows research that animal protein is "detrimental to physical well-being, feeding cancer and so forth" (Firion, Interview 2018). Finally, Veva resented the fact that she was "lied to" her "whole life":

> You believe your parents growing up, you're gonna get sick and die, you're gonna curl up like a dead insect if you don't eat [meat]… eating animals is cannibalism. I would often get sick to my stomach, because I connected with animals so fiercely and sacredly, I felt like I was eating part of myself.

4.2.4.5 The Moral Imperative of *Ahimsa*, Enlightenment, and the Golden Rule

Ethical veganism for participants of this vegan community of practice is seen as a moral imperative for believers in the *abolition* of animals as property and use of animals as food for humans. As Gaia stated at the June 2019 potluck, "This is our little green church!." Within the "Green Church," the moral imperative is derived from *ahimsa*, non-violence for all creatures, which participants believe results in compassion and enlightenment. Religion, spirituality and

animal ethics are viewed by some participants as a robust and ubiquitous facet of this enlightenment. Further, interview participants drew upon ideas from Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and other religious/spiritual expressions of their experiences before and during their involvement in VSOP as a CofP. As well, agnostic and atheist participants drew upon animal ethics in their experiences within the group, culminating in several forms of enlightenment around veganism.

Enlightenment was often contrasted to "dark times" for animals in factory farms, with veganism serving as a "light of hope." I found that metaphors enacted a process of abstraction and reconfiguration of beliefs for participants, modifying and changing mindsets and behaviors around the consumption of animal products. One of the root metaphors is the light/dark dichotomy in vegan discourse, such as the belief that animals are living in a "dark time," referring to factory farming, which further relates to the realization that animals are suffering unnecessarily. This idea supports the belief that humans who participate in the factory farming of animals are living in a new "Dark Ages," while veganism is the "Renaissance for animals," with reference to the "Golden Age of Veganism" (Observation, After-Party, June 2019). Other references include contrasting knowledge about factory farming as enlightenment to ignorance about the reality of animal suffering as darkness. For example, Yan-yan shared that she knew it was important for her to see undercover videos of farmed-animals, "horrible and disastrous, just unsightly," because it "sheds light on the dark. Going vegan is also shedding light on the darker part of life, in general, in the world, in people" (Yan-yan, Interview 2018).

The Golden Rule, or "treat others as you would like to be treated," is understood as a "vegan creed" by some participants, including atheist and agnostic participants. Combined with the precept of Do No Harm, the moral imperative of *ahimsa* aligns well with The Golden Rule as

it is formulated around enlightenment in this group. For example, Hortense believes *ahimsa,* Do No Harm, and veganism resonate with each other (Hortense, Interview 2018), while Jasper, a secular humanist/atheist, stated "The Golden Rule works for me. That's all I need. That we shouldn't harm other things, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That's more of a faith that we need to try being good, whatever that is" (Jasper, Interview 2018). For Firion, an atheist, veganism in light of the Golden Rule is the opposite of cruelty:

> The purported value of spirituality and religion to guide humankind into a better way of living would be corrupt and remiss if it is not in alignment with veganism, because the Golden Rule of do unto others as you would have done unto you is fundamental for any system of thinking which is to part with cruelty and implement compassion. Veganism is a practice of striving to omit suffering as much as practical. The opposite is cruelty, which has no place in any world worth living in.

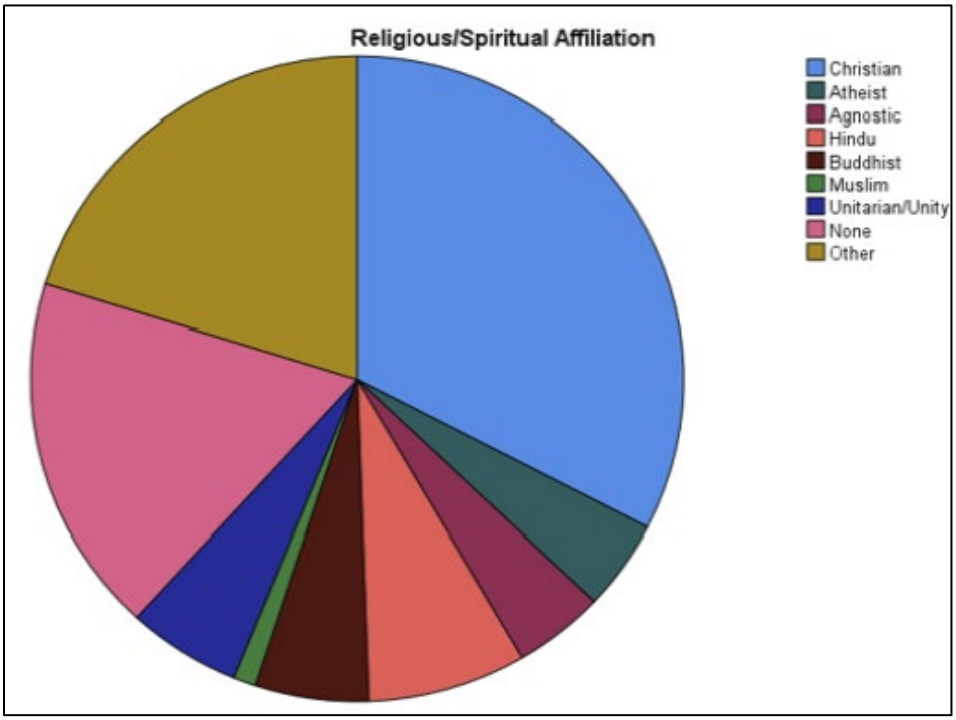
I also noted that several interview participants referred to religious and spiritual leaders as part of their enlightenment around being vegan. However, Manuela stated she believes the more vegan she becomes, the less religious, "because when I hear, for example, the Pope, or the pastor, the priest talking about love and compassion yet not addressing animals being slaughtered, it doesn't make sense anymore for me. I cannot have [...] I respect them as a human being, but I cannot have respect as a spiritual leader for me." Manuela also believes religious leaders must include animals in the Golden Rule, lest they be considered hypocrites (Manuela, Interview 2018).

It was also important not to alienate those who do not identify with traditional religions which focus on a higher power in the group, such as atheists, agnostics, anti-Theists, and secular humanists. Dmitri, who states he is not religious or spiritual, believes there are plenty of vegans "who want nothing to do with that sort of thing," referring to religious ties to veganism. Instead, he seeks to demonstrate a rational and logical basis for veganism in which religion and

spirituality is not needed in order to "believe in doing the right thing for animals" (Dmitri, Interview 2018).

Survey participants as well identified with several religions and spiritual forms of engagement with animal ethics and *ahimsa*, and animal ethics as part of their overall world view. Figure 4.8 shows that out of 89 respondents, the largest number identified as Christian (n = 29), at 32.6%. An almost equal number of respondents identified with "None" (n = 16) and "Other" (n = 18), with almost 20% of respondents not answering at all. A total of 8 respondents identified as atheist or agnostic (9%); 7 as Hindu (7.9%); 5 as Buddhist (5.6%); 1 as Muslim (1.1%); and 5 as Unitarian/Unity (5.6%). However, of those who ticked "Other," several gave specific Christian denominations: Baptist (n = 1), Methodist (n = 3), Quaker (n = 1), Episcopal (n = 1), Jewish Christian (n = 1), non-denominational Christian (n = 3) and Catholic (n = 7). This implies that the number of respondents identifying as Christian is actually much higher (n = 46), which translates to over half of respondents identifying as Christian (51.7%).

Figure 4.8: Religious/spiritual affiliation of survey participants.



Further, I wondered how many of those who did not respond at all were actually Christian, or at least culturally Christian, but did not wish to state religion for other personal reasons. I noted that just one respondent claimed "vegan" as religion, though others implied values associated with veganism, such as "The Truth," "spiritual yoga," "spiritual" (n = 6), "Holiness," and "self-realization fellowship." Furthermore, I found that in the greater Houston area, of the 80% of people who identify as "actively religious believers," 91% are Christian (Shilcutt March 1. 2016). As there were so many respondents that identified as Christian, as well as interview participants, I found that much of my findings were focused on Christian beliefs which also "fit in" with the values of the vegan moral imperative of *ahimsa*. Common themes arose regarding biblical origin stories around veganism and the idea that Jesus and other biblical figures adhered to a vegan or at least vegetarian lifestyle.

4.2.4.6 Biblical Origin Stories of Veganism

Several participants recounted origin stories around veganism as the first and best inclination for humans, especially with respect to the Garden of Eden and the Great Flood. I also encountered several vegan and vegetarian websites devoted to exegesis of biblical doctrine around dominion of humans over animals (Observations 2018-2019). First, it is necessary to briefly describe "the Dominion Clause" of the Bible for clarification, and the vegan "answer to the problem." Participants related that in the Bible, Genesis 1:26-28 states that "man should have dominion over all creation," yet Genesis 1:29 gives men "every seed-bearing plant and fruit tree" for food. Vegan and vegetarian participants who I spoke to believe this meant that humans are meant to be "plant-based." Some vegan participants indicated that in the greater Houston area, especially in rural areas where more traditional Christian values tend to reside, the idea of a barbecue or Sunday dinner without meat is seen as an affront to human privilege over

animals. Rory and Valentina, both vegan Christians and involved in their church, worry that "God gave man the power over animals, and man abused the power, as man lacks compassion and does not obey, thinking God does not see what is happening in factory farms" (Valentina, Interview 2018). With respect to evolutionism, Rory added, "It was ok to eat meat at one point in human evolution, but it is not ok now" (Rory, Interview 2018). Further, Rachael, a vegan Christian, believes that if we are to take the Bible literally, before the flood everyone was vegan. She also believes the Bible calls upon us to be "good stewards of the earth, yet man has abused the power given to him by God, which has caused a rift between non-human and human animals." As non-human animals are "closest to the divine, veganism is the conduit to regaining that sacred connection to the divine through the animals" (Rachael, Interview 2018). Finally, Hope, who identifies closely with Buddhism, is worried that Christians believe the Bible "tells them to eat animals" (Hope, Interview 2018). However, Bernadette, a core member of the group, believes "you cannot go back to Genesis to justify animal cruelty. Dominion: you don't let Adam have dominion over the other children (animals) so he can eat them!" (Observations, After-Party June 2019).

Ideas about the "Great Flood" and Noah's Ark were also prevalent in discussions with interview participants and at table conversations at the monthly potlucks. For example, Renate, a Seventh Day Adventist, believes that the myth of "humans have always eaten meat, and cows were designed for human consumption" is easily remedied by the following counter-myth:

> The idea is that before Noah's Ark, no one ate meat. When Adam and Eve lost the garden, or the fall of man, humans were allowed to eat clean meats (referring to Judaic dietary laws). However, when the Flood occurred, animals boarded the Ark seven-by-seven instead of two-by-two… two animals of each kind for procreation after the flood and five for consumption. In other words, after the flood, animals were allowed to be consumed without restrictions, yet the implication was that this was all part of the fall of man.

4.2.4.7 "Jesus was a vegan"

Veva identifies as a follower of Jesus and believes that Jesus was an Essene Jew who followed the nonviolent path similar to *ahimsa*. She also believes that he was a vegan, as were his apostles, and that he was a fierce animal advocate. Referring to Jesus at the Temple, Veva stated:

> That whole time at the temple when he saw the animals mistreated and went into a rage and flipping tables, that's one of my favorite stories. The doves and the pigeons, that's what it was. Why would the Creator who's so loving and made these innocent beings so lovingly, why on earth would He be okay with them all being slaughtered? There's no way. He was never okay with it and will never be okay with it. Do No Harm, everything has a life. Don't step on an ant when you're walking, step around it. How much does it take to walk around an ant? He doesn't want to die.

I noticed similarities between Veva's vegan outlook about nonviolence towards animals and Buddhist and Jain beliefs that animals should be respected, no matter what their size. Veva also stated the longer she has been vegan, the more clarity she has about enlightenment. She hears Jesus telling her, "You are doing the right thing, child. You are doing the right thing. He always says that" (Veva, Interview 2018). For Rachael, the Essene Gospel of Peace (from the Dead Sea Scrolls) confirms for her that Jesus was at least a vegetarian, as it states that eating animals leads to death, while doing the will of God, or eating every "herb-bearing seed or fruit from trees, leads to health and life" (Rachael, Interview 2018). Finally, Rory believes veganism has made him a "better spiritual being, a better son of God, and a better follower of Christ" (Rory, Interview 2018).

4.2.5 Identity Construction through VSOP as a CofP

Construction of identity within the community of practice is tied to beliefs and also informs practices which connect to vegan subcultural identities, as well as the greater vegan lifestyle movement. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) assert that "people move into, out of,

and through communities of practice, continually transforming identities, understanding, and world view" (1). I found this idea to be consistent with my findings in this section, which focuses on identity construction through ideas and discourse around the vegan lifeway, embodiment, health narratives, and food aesthetics of vegan potluck dishes.

4.2.5.1 Lifeway Identity

First, I considered identity as an expression of lifeway: understanding, beliefs and world views within VSOP as a CofP. At the monthly potlucks, participants related the vegan lifeway to vegan foodways as well as a sense of pride in identifying as a vegan in Houston, though there was also some consternation related to social exclusion. According to Jasper, terminology is important in self-identifying as a vegan. He prefers "plant-based or plant-powered eating," as "veganism gets a bad name… it's a label that people slap on" (Jasper, Interview 2018). For Cory, the most important thing to know about him is that he is vegan, which he shares about on his Facebook page. Leonora believes people are often afraid to say they are vegan, as this would then "open themselves up for criticism and failure" (Leonora, Interview 2018). However, Natalia stated she is proud of the vegan title, "probably to the point of being really annoying." She thinks most people find that out about her fairly quickly, though family members prefer she use the term "plant-based" (Natalia, Interview 2018). Finally, Yan-yan believes many vegans just say they are vegan to "look cool" and sugarcoat the idea with fancy foods, especially fruits, but "these dietary vegans do not understand the things behind that it really means to go vegan for the animals" (Yan-yan, Interview 2018).

Survey participants (as shown in Figure 7) identified as 62.2% vegan, 18.0% vegan-curious, 10.8 % vegetarian, 4.5% non-vegan, and 3.8% other (specified). Of those who specified their identity (n = 17), there were some interesting responses which showed the propensity for

great variation along the spectrum of what it means to identify as vegan or have interest in becoming vegan. Examples included "mostly vegan. occasional cheese and eggs"; "90% vegan 10% vegetarian"; "95%"; "also vegetarian"; "occasionally (every few years)"; and "vegan most days vegetarian 100%." These answers indicated to me that vegetarians in this group may encounter some struggle with their identity as vegetarian in a vegan group whose normative structure demands abstinence from all animal products.

Finally, identity as lifeway within the vegan CofP entails normative standards, which has further implications for "fitting in" with the greater vegan lifestyle movement. As Cory noted, vegan identity includes being in agreement with other vegans about "what to eat, wear, how to behave, what to believe in, such as the environment… you probably have a lot in common" (Cory, Interview 2018). Similarly, Marty also pointed out that vegan identity is a "testing of every second of your day, what you drink, what you eat, what you say, what you watch" (Marty, Interview 2018).

4.2.5.2 Embodiment of Vegan Identity

Second, in utilizing Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's application of CofP theory to gender, identity and power relations (1992, 1995) as a template, I considered the embodiment of veganism, or what it means to embody practices, beliefs, and discourse associated with the vegan lifeway. An example is Sal, who stated he is acutely aware of the stigmas involved with being a vegan male, such as being "weak and pale." He often referred to himself as "that guy" as a sort of empowered response to the stigma. Sal's embodiment of the identity related to the "that guy" euphemism takes on a duplicitous meaning outside of the CofP: the archetypal "vegan killjoy" (Twine 2014) and its "assertive-righteous" counterpart. For example, Sal does not feel bad about going out and "representing," but he is not going out to protest, say, the rodeo:

> Leave the people alone. Let them do their thing. *I am not going to be that guy.* You can stand outside and peacefully talk to people, but you are making, you are putting a target on yourself when you are doing that. And you are just showing how much of an ass you are. Does not matter how much you care and how compassionate you are. I think you are just annoying the hell out of people. Nobody likes that. You wouldn't like it if a bunch of meat eaters came to your vegan meet up and start throwing meat at people. It wouldn't be fun, and it wouldn't be nice. So, why go do it to them?

However, he is also "100% vegan" and goes out of his way to read every ingredient on everything: "When in doubt I do without." He also asks a lot of questions: "*I am that guy at the restaurant*" (Sal, Interview 2018).

Embodiment of one's vegan identity within the vegan CofP also refers to the physicality of what it means to be vegan, perform vegan, see oneself as vegan, and project what one wishes others to see, as well as what one supposes others see. As such, one's quality of life as a vegan is also part of that embodiment of vegan identity. Sal stated: "They see you out and about and enjoying life like a normal person. They go, 'Oh, you can have a reasonable, productive life as a vegan'" (Sal, Interview 2018). Similarly, Dmitri pointed to the "normalcy identity" of vegans. When passing or encountering a vegan in public, one may not know he is meeting a vegan: "they look just like normal people, like everyone else" (Dmitri, Interview 2018). However, Sal and other vegans also prefer a "lone wolf" or "loner vegan" embodied identity, which sometimes coincides with living in rural counties and areas of Greater Houston. However, "lone wolf veganism" is not always correlative with geography, as it is "more of a state of mind" (Dmitri, Interview 2018). Some participants like Sal believe "lone wolf vegans" care less about what others think: "I'm gonna do what I do. If you don't like it then *see you*" (Sal, Interview 2018). Further, Sal and others believe the "lone wolf vegan" may have always felt a little different from the rest of the pack (Sal, Interview 2018).

Embodiment of vegan identity within the CofP is also more awareness of the body and

how it manifests outwardly, sometimes in the form of more youthful appearance, "seeing things fresh, each person and experience a new thing" (Marty, Interview 2018). From my experiences with VSOP vegans and vegan-curious participants, "youthful appearance" is not a manifestation of actual age in terms of stereotype or even vanity, as agelessness in the context of veganism refers to a more holistic embodiment of health and even a likeness of ageless archetypes. As an example, Firion's embodied expression of vegan identity manifested in his outward appearance as I recalled meeting him for the first time:

> He is a young man in his mid to late 20's, with long dark hair and a long beard. The first time I saw him at the potluck in August 2017, I thought he looked like a Biblical figure, even Jesus. He is very slender and dresses in casual baggy clothing, He has a kind face and sensitive disposition. He seems to be an animal activist. He was proudly wearing his VSOP T-shirt at the interview, and he seemed very willing to share his deep concerns with me (Field Notes, Firion Interview 2018)

I was often surprised to learn of interview participants' actual ages in the course of the interviews, as many initially appeared much younger than their actual age. Natalia noted that she is in her 40's, so "probably a lot different from some millennial hippies showing up at the potlucks, right?" She laughed at this, and my observation was that her embodiment of vegan identity within this CofP allowed her to "blend in" with that subgroup stereotype. She also noted that many young people, especially the raw vegan subgroup, "tend to kind of act the same" (Natalia, Interview 2018); I attributed this to the embodiment if vegan identity as well, which tends to homogenize age groups and mannerisms. An example was Yan-yan, a twenty-something who often expressed the "angry youth activist" stereotype as vegan embodied identity through mannerisms and "short and sweet" speech.

However, embodiment of vegan identity within the CofP also has the potential to separate vegan members from their age cohorts as well, as younger vegans may seem much older and wiser in spirit, while older vegans may take on a more "youthful vibe." Hortense, who is in her

60's, spoke about her age cohort in terms of embodiment of vegan identity and health. She states she is living up to her potential of living a very healthy life, in order to make her health expectancy match her life expectancy (Hortense, Interview 2018). Further, Jasper, who is in his 70's, stated that because of his age, health tends to be higher in priority. He also relates health as his primary motivator to go vegan the ideas around "expected age versus expected health age," such that "your health matches your chronological age so you're not deathly sick and miserable the last five years of your life" (Jasper, Interview 2018). Finally, Gaia, who is in her early 40's, expects to be "one of these 80-year-old vegans that looks 40" (Gaia, Interview 2018).

4.2.5.3 Health Narratives

Related to the embodiment aspect of veganism, I found that participants often took a holistic approach to health, seeing the body, mind, and emotional states as integrally connected. As mentioned before, participants stated they believe individuals and communities within Houston are suffering from "lifestyle diseases," yet numerous participants told stories of personal health "miracles" related to going vegan and hopes for longevity. For example, Sissy, who is in her 60's, stated she had had a couple of mild heart attacks, which compromised her arteries. This prompted her to go vegan, and she states the doctors now tell her that her arteries "look like a twenty-year old's" (Sissy, Interview 2018). Table conversations often focused on the health benefits of veganism, how "cancers are cured" by the vegan diet, and diseases are "reversed" (Observations, Monthly Potlucks 2018-2019). Yogita believes going vegan will "make for a long life" (Yogita, Interview 2018). Further, Rachael stated she believes she would be dead if she had not gone vegan (Rachael, Interview 2018). Finally, D'Marco, in reference to his weight loss since going vegan, added: "We are fun size now" (D'Marco, Interview 2018).

I also found that the metaphor of "the body as a temple," a common phrase among

religious members of VSOP, relates to the embodied identity of being vegan. For example, referring to unhealthy animal-based foods, Renate stated that if one is going to have a spiritual relationship with God, and if "your body is the temple, why are you putting junk in your temple? Don't dirty up the temple" (Renate, Interview 2018). From this perspective, one's consumption of unhealthy foods affects bodily identity on a spiritual level. To put this another way, Antoinette (female, 70's, Black, vegetarian, newcomer) believes vegan identity entails being a "good steward of the body and soul" through detoxification (Annette, Interview 2018). Related to detoxification from animal products, Jasper exclaimed, "My doctor loves my blood work!" (Jasper, Table Conversation 2018).

4.2.5.4 Identity and Food Aesthetics

For some participants, the aesthetic appeal of vegan foods is directly related to pride in one's dish at the monthly potlucks, which serves to strengthen identity as a vegan. My observations regarding this facet of identity construction focused on the dishes brought to the potlucks as manifestations and extensions of the vegan embodiment of identity. Aesthetics also focused on presentation of vegan foods. Further, I considered the aesthetics of vegan foods in relation to community-building within the CofP. For example, Sal likes to "show off" his cooking skills at the vegan potlucks, which he believes participants really appreciate: "It feels nice to be appreciated." He also seeks out others who put a great deal of effort into their dishes, which are often like artistic pieces. He described making spring rolls for one of the potlucks as well as vegetable curries (Sal, Interview 2018). I was also impressed by the beauty and simplicity of Firion's "case of bananas" at the January 2019 potluck, as well as the Reverend's "fruit" (see Fig. 4.9).

Figure 4.9: Lovely Presentation of vegan foods at various potluck gatherings*:* (from left clockwise): Bastille Day French flag fruit tart, Mung sprouts rice salad with lemons, Farro salad, Colorful herb-roasted vegetables, vegetable dumplings, and assorted whole fruits.

Aesthetic appeal of vegan foods is also related to community-building in the vegan CofP, as this identity construction related to pride in one's creations can be further used to teach newcomers about presentation. From my own experience as a participant observer, I noticed that vegan-curious newcomers and even some long-time regulars and Board members would bring store-bought vegan foods to the potlucks (Observations, Potlucks, 2018-2019). In my own journey as a vegan-curious participant, after several months I began "experimenting" with vegan cooking and baking, after which I always tried to "out-do" myself and bring an even tastier creation to the next gathering. Finally, participants shared with me that bringing one's own creation is part of the learning process to becoming vegan in the group, which also has implications for cost-effectiveness, shunning vegan convenience items which are highly processed, and getting "back to the basics" by using whole foods plant based (WFPB) products. The following figure shows vegan food creations from various Second Saturdays monthly potlucks hosted by VSOP:

Having considered motivations for going vegan, hierarchies around core and peripheral membership in VSOP as a CofP, practices, beliefs, and identity construction within the CofP, I have also addressed ways in which vegan and vegan-curious participants are creating, building, and maintaining a vegan community of practice in Houston. I now turn to barriers to veganism, which provides a basis for deliverables to the client VSOP.

4.3 Barriers to Veganism

The purpose of this section of the chapter is to consider the most common barriers to veganism as experienced by interview and survey participants. By taking an in-depth look at barriers to veganism, I was also able to distinguish between personal versus systemic barriers related to the idea of vegan privilege, both as "the ubiquitous and unmarked whiteness of

veganism" (Polish 2016) and in terms of "the ability to make food choices is ultimately the privilege" (Greenebaum 2017, 360). As well, I considered how the food system around the commodification of animals in factory farming is also a structural barrier to veganism. Through these distinctions, I was better able to make suggestions for improved outreach for the client VSOP, as well as show which aspects of outreach are working well for the client.

Personal barriers included cost, transportation, social exclusion, including misunderstanding and stereotyping, taste, habit, tradition, and convenience. Structural barriers included issues of access to vegan foods, ideas around vegan privilege in Houston, and how the food system manifests locally for participants, especially with regards to dairy and eggs. I also found that the structural barriers are both spatially and culturally constructed phenomena within the greater Houston area, which I supported with maps derived from survey data coupled with data from the Happy Cow App. Finally, I considered the impact of food deserts on vegan outreach in Greater Houston.

Interesting points from analysis include the following: Social exclusion for interview participants is often related to issues of misunderstanding, especially by family and relatives. Social exclusion is also often related to tradition. Regarding access and cost, I was surprised to find that few interview participants found these barriers to be particularly prohibitive. Finally, protein and medical reasons appeared to not have much impact as barriers for both survey and interview participants. In fact, most stated that plant-based protein was better for health reasons, which also relates back to the biological myth around veganism. In order to better understand these barriers to going vegan, I looked at specific barriers, beginning with cost.

4.3.1 Cost

I found that cost was not always a barrier for participants when it comes to vegan foods

and products, but it often depends on whether the food is processed or not, and whether one cooks at home or eats out. Further, many participants believe eating meat is much more expensive in the long run. Further, the idea of creativity often plays into concerns about cost, especially for participants who cook at home and employ shopping strategies at a combination of locations for "eating whole foods and staying on the cheap" (Tanja, Interview 2018). However, other participants stated that healthy, fresh, organic options are often more expensive than fast food which is largely based on animal proteins. Further, nuts and processed vegan foods tended to be more expensive for participants. As well, eating out at all-vegan restaurants and even food trucks are considered by some participants as a cost barrier. Comparing cooking at home to food trucks in Houston, Sal stated:

> I know people want to encourage them. But it's like, again $10 nachos, come on. Right? It's not that special. But again, you are talking $10, $15, $20 for a snack at a freaking a truck sitting out in the heat. It is not my cup of tea. There aren't a whole lot of reasonably priced vegan places. And I just for the stuff they're making, it doesn't wow me. I could do it for half the price, or a quarter of the price. So, I'll go out every now and again but not I don't seek them out.

Finally, regarding "regular restaurants," Yogita stated it is cheaper eating out, because vegan dishes are usually comprised of a salad. However, as Dina pointed out,

> Being stuck to eat some salad that costs $7.00 at a regular restaurant, it is cheaper to eat at home, especially for a family of six. However, regarding pre-made items, vegan gets expensive even at home. You weight the option of buying it or looking up the recipe and making it from scratch.

I noticed that many of the interview participants who found cost to be less of a problem were newcomers to the group. Both regulars and newcomers engaged in creative ways to stretch their budgets around being vegan, and there was a unified belief that eating out vegan was more expensive.

4.3.2 Transportation

Transportation as a barrier to attending the potlucks and other vegan events was most related to the unique qualities of the Houston metro area, such as relative distance to travel across its vastness, high volumes of traffic in certain areas, especially around the downtown area, the high price of gasoline, and convenience. Some participants stated they use public transportation in the form of buses and Uber. For example, Jory does not have a car and chooses to bike to campus or take the bus. Yan-yan stated she did not have a car and actually preferred the Metro Bus, because of the price of gas. Related to travelling to the monthly potlucks located in downtown Houston, Natalia, who lives to the north of Houston in Cypress, stated that the commute was not really a barrier: “But since it is only once a month, I don’t mind the 45 - minute commute each way.” Finally, regarding transportation and grocery stores, Renate does not like driving anywhere in Houston: “To get somewhere in Houston takes forever and you've got to deal with crazy people, so I just stick to the grocery stores close to me” (Renate, Interview 2018). I found that most participants in this group had their own vehicle and that transportation was not a significant barrier to going vegan for most. Interestingly, Rory and Valentina chose to drive a “Smart Car,” which is considered a subcompact eco-friendly electric vehicle, as part of their vegan journey. Other participants as well extended their vegan journey in a holistic manner to biking instead of driving and other eco-friendly activities.

4.3.3 Social Exclusion

Social exclusion is one of the most difficult barriers to overcome for some participants when going vegan in Houston, as social gatherings in Houston focus so heavily on non-vegan foods. Cultural narratives around barbecue and steak houses are heavily weighted in Houston, especially in rural and outlying areas. Also, as one travels towards Galveston and the coast,

gatherings around fish and seafood are prevalent non-vegan activities. As well, bayou culture calls for crawfish boils and other Cajun-inspired cuisine, such as gumbo, which features an array of animal products. Social exclusion is also intertwined with the domain of kinship for many participants. An example is Antoinette, who stated that none of her family are vegetarians. If she goes to see family in the northeast, "they only serve soul foods. So, a lot of times, if I go in that direction, I got to buy my own food while I'm there and cook it" (Antoinette, Interview 2018). Even sharing holidays at home with omnivore family members can be challenging for new vegan sand vegan-curious participants, especially around the Thanksgiving turkey or the Easter ham. Further, Hope stated the only thing negative about going vegan is being invited to a party where everybody is eating meat "and they forget there's somebody coming that doesn't eat it. And so, they don't have any options" (Hope, Interview 2018). Social exclusion also relates to misunderstanding, as the latter often leads to the former.

4.3.4 Misunderstanding

Misunderstanding in terms of invalidation of veganism and stereotyping led to a common belief by many participants that they are indeed being judged as individuals and to some extent as a group, though they also believe carnist norms are being challenged every day in Houston. At the June 2018 potluck, presenter George Matthews described one of the lessons he learned along the way on his own vegan journey: "If you want to be accepted, you have to deal with being *misunderstood*" (Observation, "George Matthews: Six Vegan Lessons I've Learned While Flying," June 2018 Potluck). From the standpoint of vegan participants in this group, it is the concept of *misunderstanding* which best describes the defense mechanisms used by non-vegans who feel threatened by vegan ideologies. According to participants, misunderstanding manifests in the form of direct confrontation, offhand remarks, sarcasm, "Bacon jokes," outright hostility

and passive-aggressive manipulation, often by non-vegan family members. Misunderstanding lacks compassion and empathy. It is hollow and mechanical, driven by the desire to be right.

At best, carnist misunderstanding is viewed by participants as a form of ignorance; at worst, it manifests as personal verbal attacks on vegans, either in person or virtually, as I witnessed on the Facebook forum "Vegan Sanity – Meat Eater and Vegetarian Discussion and Debate" Observations, 2018-2021). As Dina stated, "anything dealing with vegetarian or veganism on the internet is more about just making fun of [you]. They want to call you names." (Dina, Interview 2018). Further, Gaia told me the only negative side of going vegan was "other people's negativity, misunderstanding, misconceptions, and stupid comments, people more concerned about what you're *not* eating." However, she confessed that she also used to make fun of people: "What do they eat, a pear?" (Interview, Gaia 2018). For Jasper, misunderstanding arrived in the form of tropey queries and sarcastic remarks: "Where do you get your protein?" and "You don't live longer, it only *seems* longer… Oh yeah, when you're eating tree bark and bananas and raw potatoes, you don't live any longer, but it seems like many, many more years longer" (Jasper, Interview 2018). Or "you must eat a lot of salad" (Valentina, Interview 2018).

Some newcomers to the group also found it hard to tell non-vegans of their vegan status, or lifeway, as the belief is that non-vegans become defensive, feel offended and strike back. Further, newcomers stated they sometimes feel ridiculed by non-vegans. Indeed, in general participants believe there is the potential for confoundment, alienation, anger at the vegan, and feeling threatened by the vegan. The belief is extended to the idea that to ignore the vegan is also a threat; the vegan must be confronted because she has a fundamentally different way of seeing life.

I also considered that misunderstanding around veganism leads to stereotyping,

especially around gender, such as "weak and pale men who do not play sports, do not do anything athletic," "peace loving hippies that sit around smoking weed and burning patchouli. a bunch of pushovers" (Sal, Interview 2018), or "millennial hippies" (Natalia, Interview 2018).

Stereotypes as a barrier to veganism was also related to "white women who founded PETA" (Jory, Interview 2018); vegan doctors as "arrogant or pompous" (Marty, Interview 2018); vegans as "snotty and holier than thou" (Natalia, Interview 2018); and "rich white people" (Gaia, Interview 2018).

Further misunderstanding in the domain of kinship manifests as a highly emotional complex. Many participants described that family members simply do not understand their vegan journey, which is a barrier to going vegan. For Spargle, it is the lack of understanding in her own family that is perplexing. Certainly, her daughters understand that she is vegan, and what she does not eat, but they do not understand how hurtful it is for her when, at Thanksgiving, they talk about the non-vegan dishes they made:

> It's a total disconnect, so she doesn't understand that the images [of animals] that come across my head […] so I usually tell her 'you know, I don't want to hear it'. They don't try to get me to eat meat, but I'm sitting there and they're bringing bits of Turkey, and I just know, you know. And so, it's I guess being around non-vegans is hurtful to me, really. So, but most of the world is not vegan, clearly my family.

Finally, the belief in misunderstanding is applicable to those who have never heard of veganism, as Yan-yan related: "Like I say, 'Hi guys, I'm vegan.' And they're like, 'What's that?' So, they have basically no clue [why I am not eating meat] (Yan-yan, Interview 2018).

4.3.5 Taste

Taste as a barrier is an embodied and therefore internal response to vegan foods. Further, because of the physical and evolutionary implications for humans, this barrier is seen by some interview participants as one of the most difficult to overcome. Specifically, the taste of meat is a

barrier, with vegan substitutes paling in comparison. Others stated they would rather stick with unprocessed and natural beans, grains, fruits and vegetables, whose richness and variety of taste is sufficient in and of itself. For Maya, taste is related to cravings, not for meat, but for the taste of the sauces and spices which give meat its flavor: “Like when I crave buffalo wings, I am actually craving buffalo sauce, the barbecue sauce” (Maya, Interview 2018). However, Dina shared that nonvegan critics go straight to the flavor of vegan foods: “But it must taste nasty. No doubt it is a change of pace for your taste buds, and it does take time in order for your taste buds to adjust” (Dina, Interview 2018). While taste as a barrier to veganism is significant, I found that most participants found creative ways to overcome this barrier by substituting plant-based alternatives and using natural flavors of foods, spices and sauces to adhere to the vegan lifeway.

4.3.6 Habit

In discourse analysis, I found that habit as a barrier to veganism was closely related to ideas and metaphors for addiction to animal products. Participants often referred to the link between health and food addiction. For D’Marco, his “cheese habit” was addictive, “like heroin.” He went on to describe his days working at a local radio station: “Every day I ate burgers, multiple cheeseburgers with fries.” He described his fast-food addiction as a “perversion” and described himself as a “fast food junkie”; he felt so ashamed, fearing he would be discovered, and told himself to “get it together.” I likened this to discourse and experiences of alcoholics and addicts trying to “beat their habits.” Finally, D’Marco knew that “things had to change,” and he eventually went “cold turkey” from meat and cheese consumption, experiencing withdrawal symptoms during the detoxification phase: “It was all or nothing.” D’Marco further stated that if he went back to eating meat and back to that lifestyle, “I would be sick again. I would be almost

300 pounds again, and I feel like I would be worse this go round. I don't miss heavy." (D'Marco, Interview 2018).

I also discovered an overlap between food addictions and other substance abuse and addictions, especially alcoholism. In consideration of this connection, Antoinette had much to contribute when I met her at the September 2018 potluck. As a woman in recovery from alcohol and substances, she was aware of cross-addictions, including food. Her main motivation for going vegan was health, and she was looking for vegans who could "show her the right way to follow the lifestyle, hold her hand," as she put it. Her decision to go vegan was heavily informed by her desire for longevity and health, but also with the awareness that years of abuse to her body called for "extreme measures" (Antoinette, Observations September 2018). My conversations with Antoinette and further interviews with other participants in recovery from alcohol also led to suggestions for outreach at substance abuse recovery centers (see Appendix C).

Related to habit as a barrier to veganism as well as the health motivation are the "lifestyle diseases," which many participants also saw as a barrier to veganism by virtue of giving up the habit of consuming animal products. Participants referred to heart attacks, cancers such as colon and prostate, stroke, even reproductive issues as linked to consuming non-vegan foods. Other references to lifestyle-related diseases included digestive disorders; sexual dysfunction; obesity; mental and emotional health, including anger, rage, anxiety and depression, sociopathy, alcoholism and substance abuse; lack of energy; low self-esteem; nightmares, night terrors, and paradoxical states; and PTSD.

4.3.7 Tradition

Participants related traditions to holidays, hospitality and expectations by family

members and non-vegan hosts, as well as national and cultural pride, as a barrier to veganism. Tradition is also closely related to social exclusion and events where barbecue and other "meat-centric" dishes are served. Traditions around non-vegan foods were also linked to nostalgia around comfort foods and the grieving process for those foods. For example, Natalia stated she mourned the loss of consuming animal products:

> That's when I knew that there was no turning back, and I was somehow was going to get over the fact I never going to consume an egg over medium, (laughs) now the thought of it repulses me. These were comfort foods, you know, sausage and gravy, hash browns, I guess it all revolves around the old breakfast diner foods (laughs) but now a lot of comfort foods to me revolve around bananas and avocado (laughs) You just sort of change your life and what you consume.

Hortense related tradition as a barrier to going vegan to fear of change. She believes the non-vegan is "too afraid of giving something up, without understanding how much they're going to be gaining in return […] All they can see is that they're giving up something that culturally has been passed down through their family for centuries" (Hortense, Interview 2018). Other participants from both LatinX and other American backgrounds stated the important of certain cultural traditions and foods in their families of origin and extended families. They often encountered backlash from relatives and friends who could not understand why they would shun certain traditions, mainstays and delicacies associated with their cultures.

4.3.8 Convenience

Convenience as a barrier to going vegan was related by participants to comfort, ease, and lack of vegan options. For Bobo (male, 60's, white, vegetarian, newcomer), convenience related to the idea of compromise: "It's more just the personal challenge of, here's something that would be easy and convenient, that's non-vegan. And here's something I like less, but at least I can maintain being vegan. That's the trade - off you have." (Bobo, Interview 2018). However, Sissy stated she does not mind "a little inconvenience" for good vegan food (Sissy, Interview 2018).

Meanwhile Valentina stated is “over the convenience thing, which translates to living in a society that says I want something, and I want it now and I can go get it” (Valentina, Interview 2018). Rory added that we have unfortunately been “trained for a drive-thru mentality and so veganism is very challenging” (Rory, Interview 2018).

Related to the idea of a convenience and the lack of vegan options, Jory stated he resists going out to eat because of the lack of vegan options:

> There often aren't that many vegan options at restaurants that aren't vegan. For example, I went to a Mexican restaurant for my friend's birthday, and they have like 15 vegetarian options and zero vegan options. When I look up the menu in advance to see what options are available, I wonder is there anything even possibly, remotely accessible to me? And if not, then I'm not even going to bother to eat there.

For Yogita, it is the lack of *healthy* vegan-options that is the main barrier, which also relates back to cost and availability:

> First is whenever I'm eating out, lack of healthy vegan options. I know I can get French fries, or I can get some processed, oily, sugary food. But consuming that over something healthier kind of things has been a challenge. The cost at times. Availability, going out of my way to go to Whole Foods as opposed to Food Star which is just a block away.

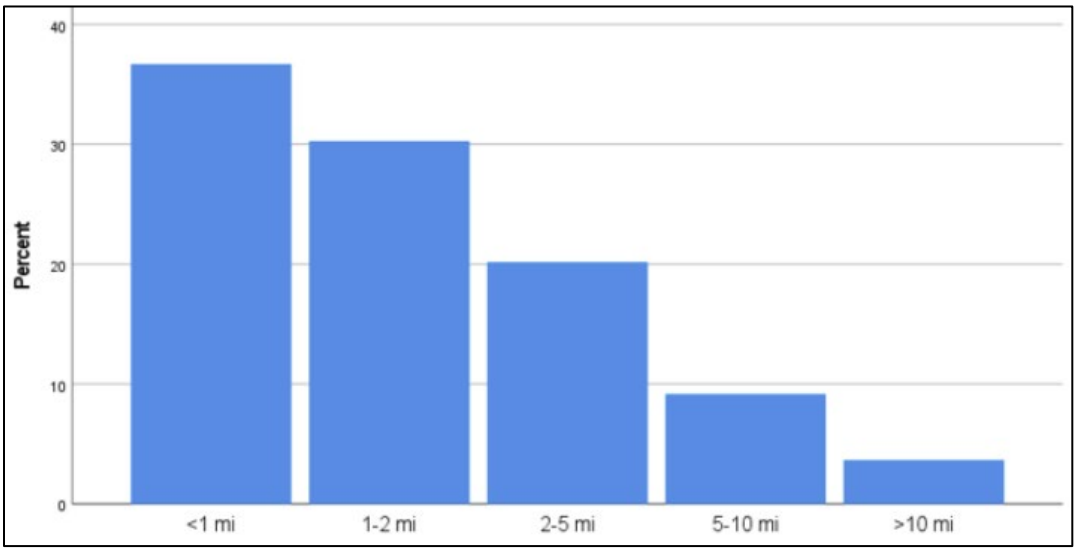
Other participants referred to having only salad as an option at most restaurants, sometimes not even that (Manuela, Interview 2018). For Tatum (female, 20’s, white, vegetarian, newcomer), being vegetarian is “a convenience thing,” as so many products in restaurants contain eggs and dairy, so going completely vegan is too hard with respect to convenience (Tatum, Interview 2018). Overall, convenience was also closely related to availability of vegan foods options grocery stores and restaurants, which ties into the greater vegan lifestyle movement as well as the larger political economy of factory farming.

4.3.9 Structural Barriers: Access and Privilege

In consideration of access to vegan foods, ideas around vegan privilege and whiteness, and space as place in Greater Houston, I conducted quantitative analysis using my survey data,

maps from the Happy Cow App, demographic data, indicators of median income, poverty levels, and a food insecurity index map from the "Houston State of Health" website, as well as a map of food desert areas in Houston from the USDA website. First, I considered vegan and vegan-curious survey participants who were asked about their perceptions of distance from their home to nearest vegan-option grocery or market, and distance to nearest vegan-option restaurant. Perceptions of distance to vegan-friendly establishments is interesting in that they provide a look at how survey participants consider issues of access and convenience, which may assist the client VSOP in outreach campaigns and events associated with these establishments.

Figure 4.10: Perceptions of distance to vegan-friendly markets.

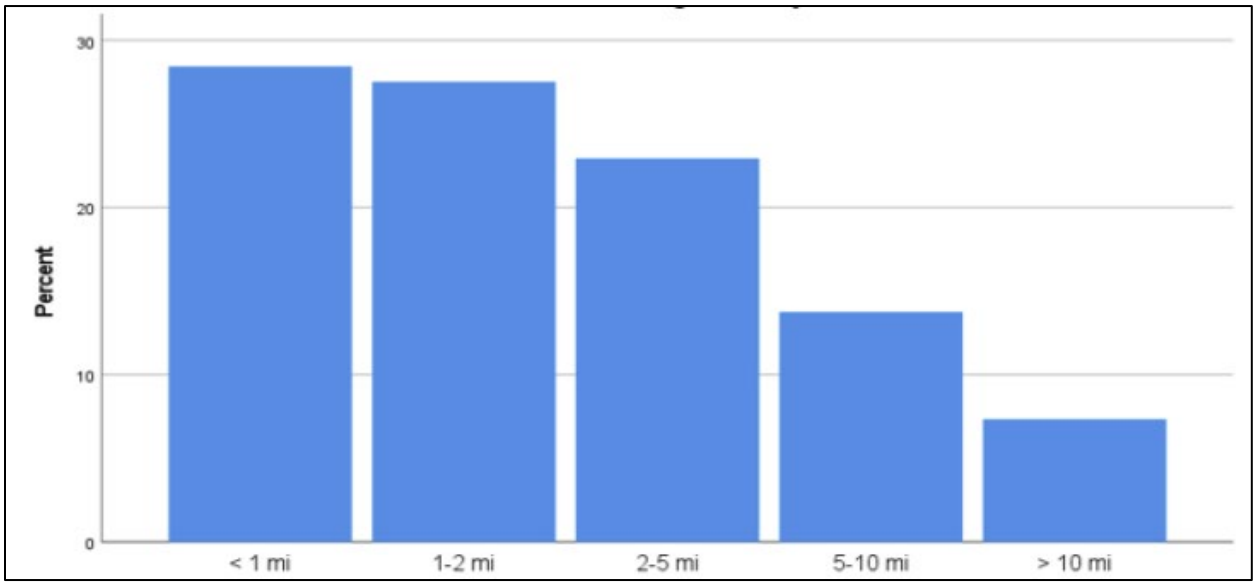


In Figure 4.10, the median distance is one to two miles, with the largest percentage of participants (n = 109) who perceived vegan-friendly markets as less than one mile from home (36%; n = 40), followed by one to two miles (30.3%; n = 33). 22 participants perceived longer distances of two to five miles (20.2%; n = 22), while only ten participants perceived distances of five to ten miles (9.2%; n = 10), and four participants perceived distances of greater than ten miles (3.7%; n = 4). This data is consistent with data showing that most vegan-friendly markets are located in the most central and vegan-friendly, economically privileged, and urban parts of

the Greater Houston area. Further, since most participants reside in more economically privileged zip codes of Harris County, these perceptions of distance as mostly close and accessible make the most sense.

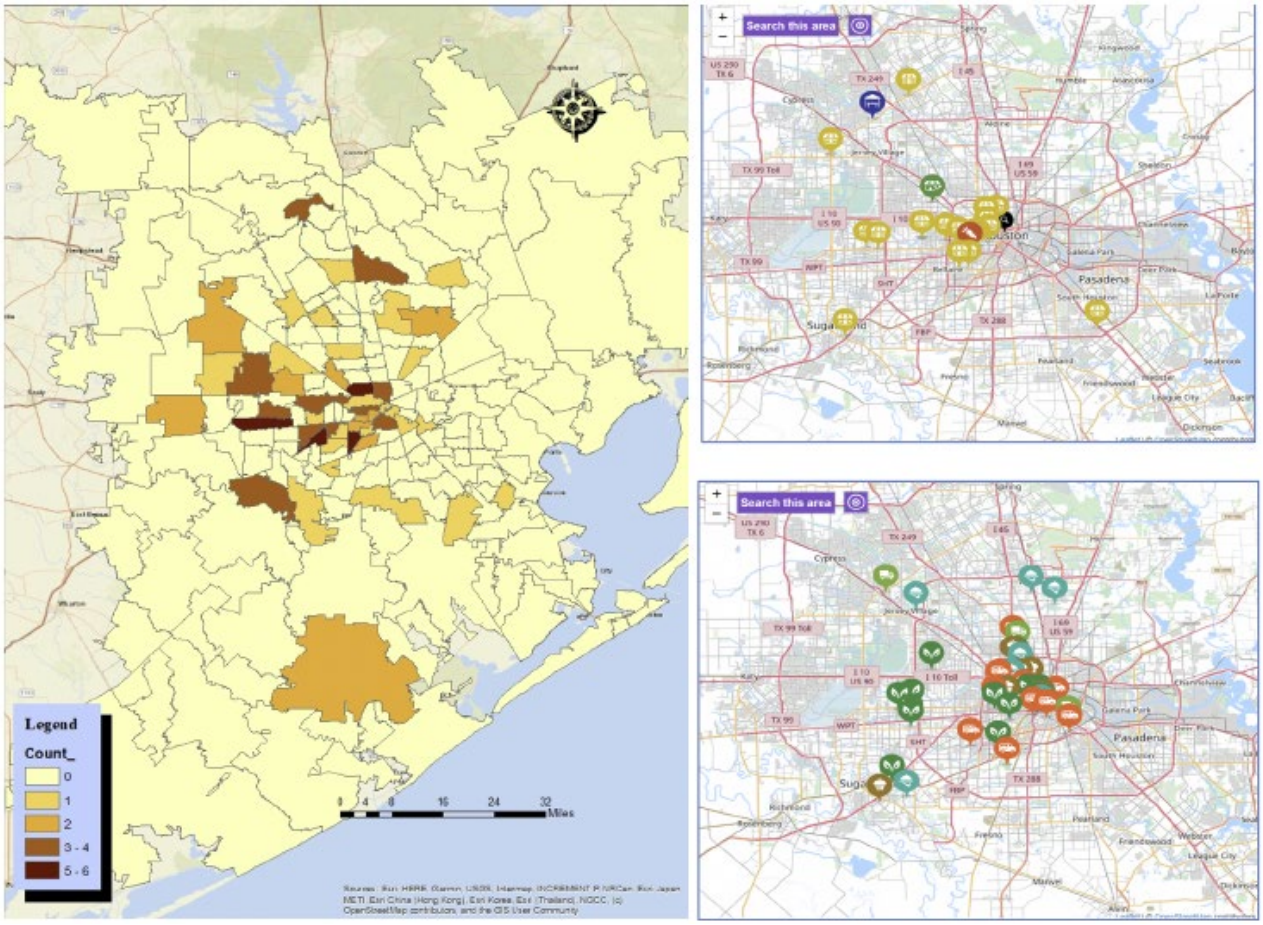
With regards to perceptions of distance to the nearest vegan-friendly restaurants, I found a similar trajectory, as shown in Figure 4.11. The median distance is also one to two miles, with the greatest percentage of survey participants (28.4%; n = 31) perceiving distance to vegan-friendly restaurants as less than one mile, followed by one to two miles (27.5%; n = 30); two to five miles (22.9%; n = 25); five to ten miles (13.8%; n = 15); and greater than ten miles (7.3%; n = 8). Again, when examining the zip code data, I found that participants who perceived distances of five to greater than ten miles tended to live in outlying areas of greater Houston, indicating a preponderance of vegan-friendly restaurants in the most central, urban, and economically privileged areas of Harris County. These results suggest barriers to veganism with regards to rural and suburban access, as well as indicators for a closer examination of vegan-friendly markets and restaurants.

Figure 4.11: Perceptions of distance to vegan-friendly restaurants.



In order to better situate these results within the greater vegan lifestyle movement in Houston, I then looked at data from the Happy Cow App, a useful resource and mobile application for vegans and vegetarians seeking vegan-friendly markets, restaurants and other venues across Greater Houston. Happy Cow currently lists 41 all-vegan establishments in Greater Houston, with the majority located inside Loop 610 and towards the center of Houston. These establishments include restaurants, food trucks, ice cream shops, catering venues, market vendors, bakeries, juice bars, delivery services and non-profit organizations including VSOP. Happy Cow also lists 161 Vegetarian restaurants/, Farmer's Markets, Health Stores (including Whole Foods Market) and Professionals, including Dr. Baxter Montgomery and Dr. Bandana Chawla, a regular, Advisory Board member, and speaker/presenter at VSOP events. Of the 497 "Veg-Option" establishments, many are ethnic foods such as East Asian, South Asian, Hispanic, Soul Food, Mediterranean, Ethiopian and southern American favorites like "veganized" burgers and barbecue. Figure 4.12 is a panel map showing survey participants by zip code area in greater Houston and two maps from the Happy Cow App: the first showing a preponderance of vegan-friendly markets in the central and western parts of Houston, which are considered by participants to be relatively higher income areas of Houston, the second showing all-vegan restaurants, food trucks, caterers, bakeries and delivery services. Figure 4.12 shows the highest concentration of survey participants in Harris County, in and around the downtown area, with pockets to the southwest, west and variously dispersed throughout greater Houston into neighboring counties to the north and south. It should be noted that this is a different version of the map of survey participants found in Chapter 3 (Fig. 3.1).

Figure 4.12: Panel of Maps, from left (clockwise): (1) Map of survey participants by zip code, (2) Map of Happy Cow Listings for Health Stores, Market Vendors, and Farmer's Markets in Houston. Radius: 26.51 miles. 21 Listings. (3) Happy Cow Listings for All-Vegan Restaurants, Food trucks, caterers, bakeries and delivery services. Radius: 26.51 miles. 41 Listings.

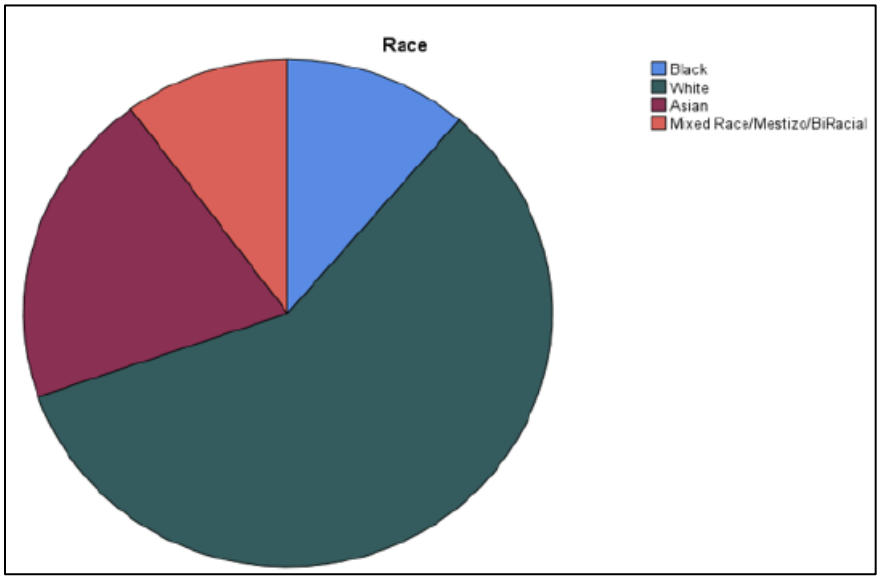


Sources: (1) Esri, HERE, Garmin, USGS, Intermap, INCREMENT P, NRCan, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), Esri Korea, Esri (Thailand), NGCC OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community; (2) Happy Cow 2021; (3) Happy Cow 2021.

Participants often referred to shopping at "health food stores" like Sprouts, Trader Joe's, Central Market (HEB) and Whole Foods, which make up the majority of these listings, as indicated in the above map (upper right) by the yellow store logo. Other participants referred to Farmer's Markets and smaller fresh produce markets as sources for vegan food items. Further, while all-vegan restaurants are also mostly located in more "privileged" areas of Houston, I was aware of a growing trend in vegan food trucks, caterers, bakeries and delivery options, as indicated in the second map (lower right).

I was particularly interested in the food trucks (shown in orange), as I encountered much discourse around them. Further, from my observations, the food truck movement in Houston is closely connected to subverting racial and privileged norms around veganism by virtue of many Black and Hispanic-owned food trucks, as well as locations ranging from the Third Ward, an historically Black neighborhood and communities to the East of Downtown ("Eado") to more suburban areas to the north and southwest of Houston. Further, at VegFest Houston 2019 (Observation July 2019), held at Minute Maid Park in downtown Houston, I found that many attendees were people of color (POC) seeking healthier food choices, with long lines for the food trucks and various vendors mostly operated by POC. Finally, catering-based operations, often run by POC and home-vegan chefs (mostly women), as well as bakeries and delivery start-ups, are showing up in even further outlying areas of Greater Houston. This indicated a demand for vegan foods even in more rural areas, and these spatial patterns may suggest growth of the vegan lifestyle movement in Greater Houston as a whole.

Figure 4.13: Racial identity of survey participants.

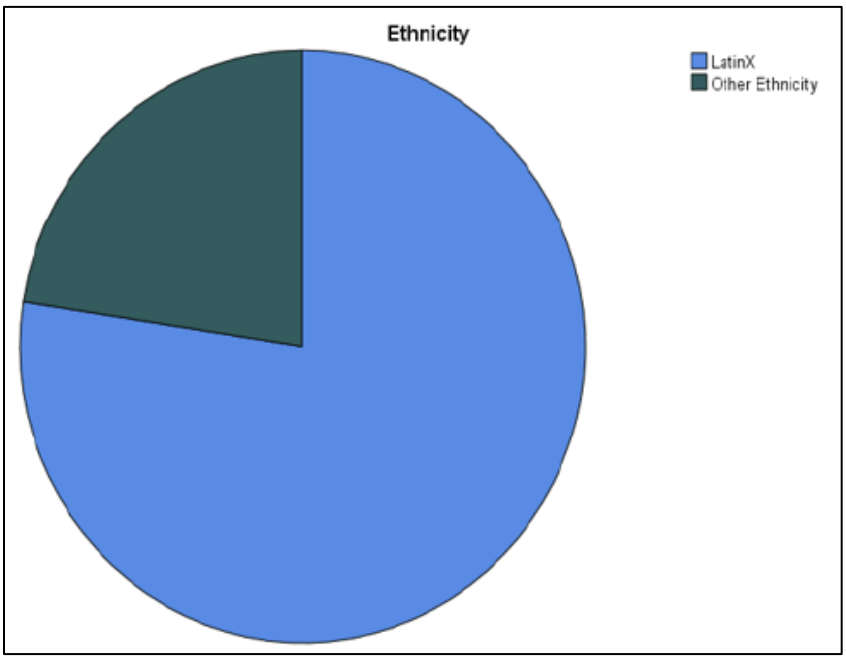


In order to address a "race-conscious" veganism, I also revisited demographic information about the survey participants. First, I noted a preponderance of white participants, as

shown in Figure 4.13. In the figure, out of a total of 89 survey respondents who identified race (n = 89), the majority identified as white (58.4%; n = 52), followed by Asian (20.2%; n = 18); Black (11.2%; n = 10); and Mixed Race/Mestizo/Bi-Racial (10.1%; n = 9).

Figure 4.14 shows that out of the 31 participants who identified ethnicity (n = 31), 77.4 % of participants identified as LatinX (n = 24), and 22.6% identified as "other ethnicity" (n = 7), comprised of 4 participants who identified as "Indian (India)"; 2 as "Anglo"; and 1 as Vietnamese.

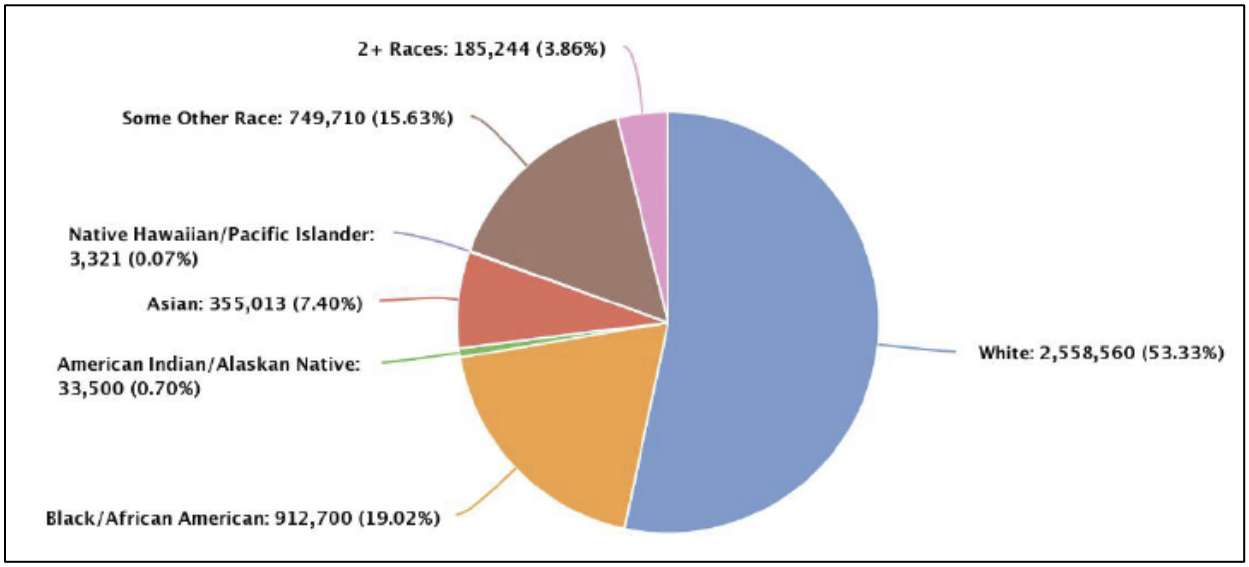
Figure 4.14: Ethnicity (LatinX and Other Ethnicity).



Figures 4.15 and 4.16 show population by race and ethnicity in Harris County, where the majority of survey participants reside. Data are consistent with survey data, showing that survey participants in VSOP as a community of practice are largely representative of demographics in Harris County, where the majority of survey participants reside, though the Asian participants account for a larger percentage than Harris County demographic percentages (20.2 % versus 7.4 %, respectively). As a comparison, 58.4% of survey participants identified as white; 53.3% of

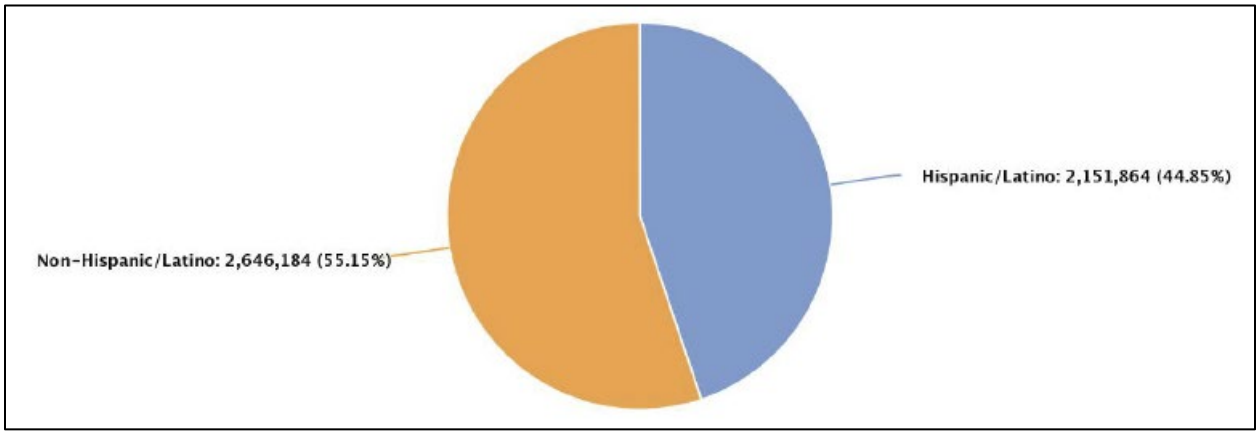
Harris County population is white; 11.2% of survey participants identified as Black, while 19.0 % of Harris County population is Black/African American; and regarding ethnicity, 77.4% of participants identified as LatinX, while 44.85 % of Harris County population by ethnicity identifies as Hispanic/Latino (LatinX). Further, while Houston lacks any racial/ethnic majority (see Fig. 1.4), those interested in veganism or already vegan who participate in VSOP events are still largely white according to my survey data.

Figure 4.15: Population by race in Harris County.



Source: Houston State of Health website, powered by Conduent Healthy Communities Institute 2021.

Figure 4.16: Population by ethnicity in Harris County.



Source: Houston State of Health website, powered by Conduent Healthy Communities Institute 2021.

A limitation to this study is that my data is only a slice of reality as it were, as my observations show a high percentage of South Asian participants, especially at the "Walk for Animals, Walk for Peace" event. Further, at the larger VegFest Houston events I noticed a much larger proportion of POC vegans and vegan-curious attendees, which may point to further breaking of barriers around vegan privilege and whiteness in Houston. Implications that the "whiteness" of the vegan movement in Houston is still a prevalent force are therefore challenged, and my data is supportive of this aspect as well. However, to further understand this implication, I needed to also look at other demographic data, including household income as it pertains to race and ethnicity, in order to better understand whether race and ethnicity played a part in issues of access to vegan foods. In terms of estimated household income, survey respondents (n = 84) indicated that the highest number fell in the median range of $60,000 to 9$99,00 per year (28.6%; n = 24), with the next highest range at $100,000 to $199,000 range (23.8%; n = 20), which leads me to conclude that overall, survey participants have a relatively higher household income than the median average of Houston, which according to US Census data 2015-2019 is $52,338 (US Census QuickFacts 2021). Further, Figures 4.17 and 4.18 show household income of survey participants according to race identification as well as ethnicity (LatinX participants).

Out of 69 survey participants who responded to both the question about household income and race, I found that the median income was in the range of $60,000 to $99,000 per year. The chart shows the highest number by far in the median range as those who identified as white (n = 15), and in the next highest income range of $100,000 to $199,000 (n = 10), with the total number of white respondents at 40 (n = 40). This would indicate that white respondents tend to have a higher median household income in the group of survey respondents. Regarding LatinX participants (n = 18), median income was lower and closer to the median average for

Houston household income, as shown in Figure 4.19.

Figure 4.17: Estimated annual household income for survey participants according to race identification.

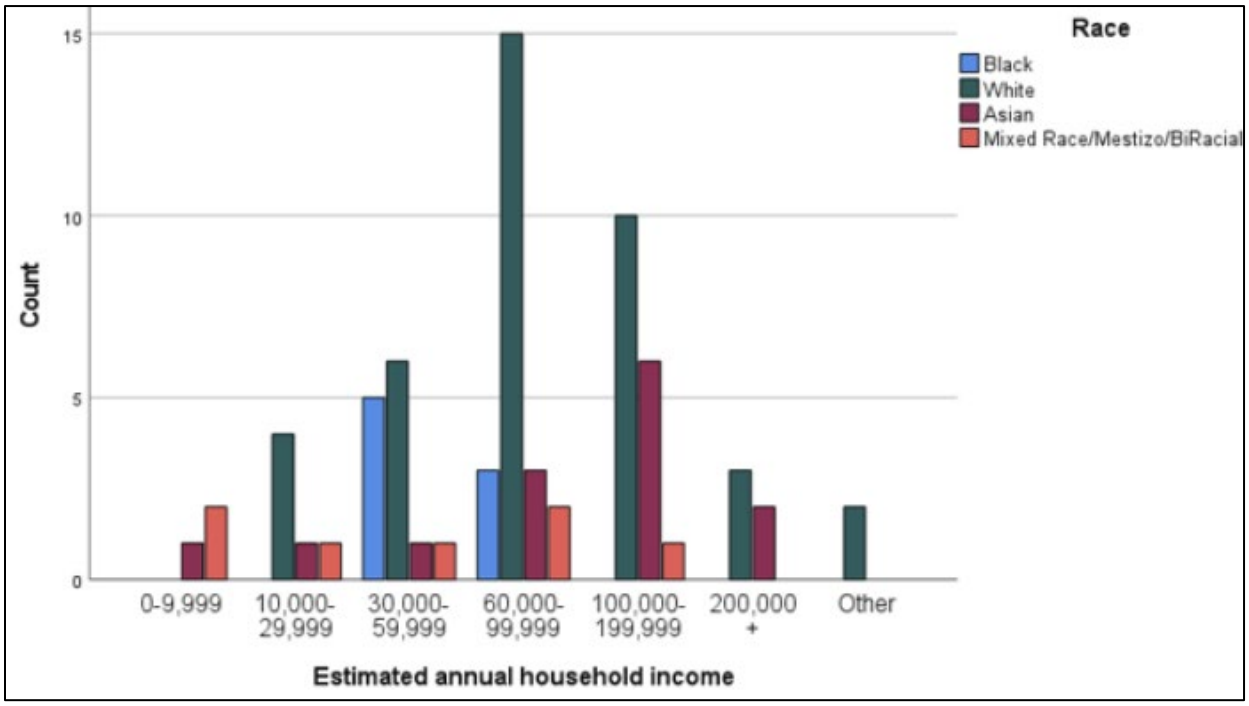


Figure 4.18: Estimated annual household income for LatinX survey participants.

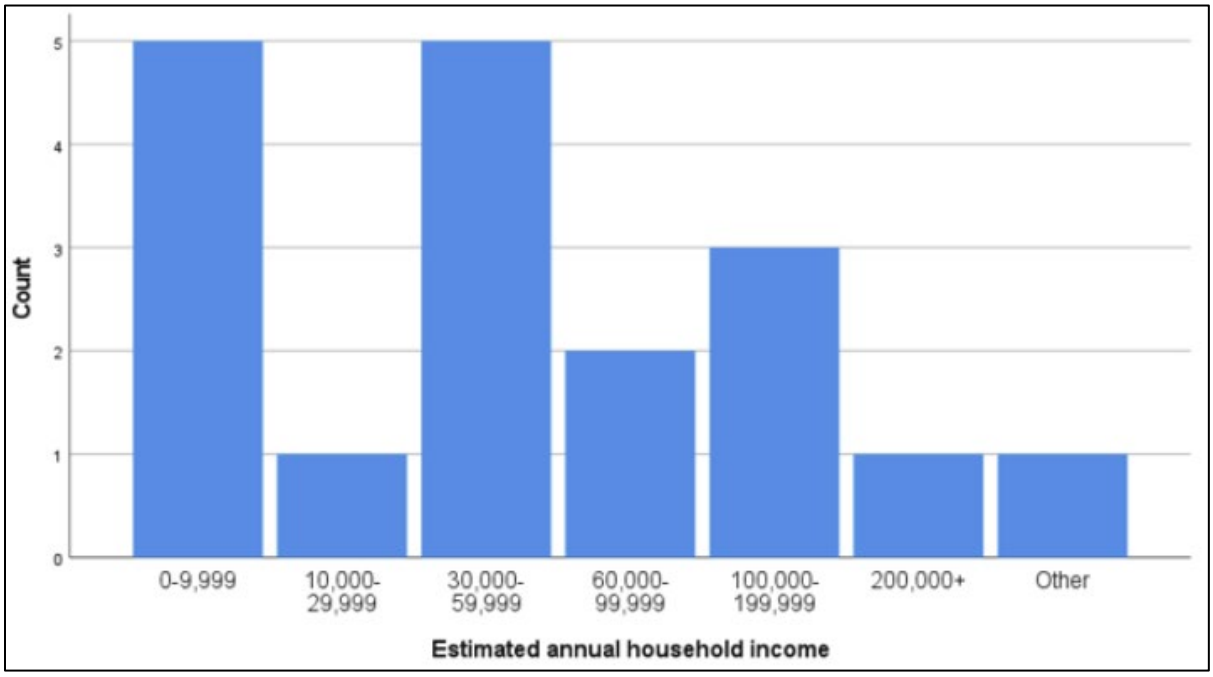
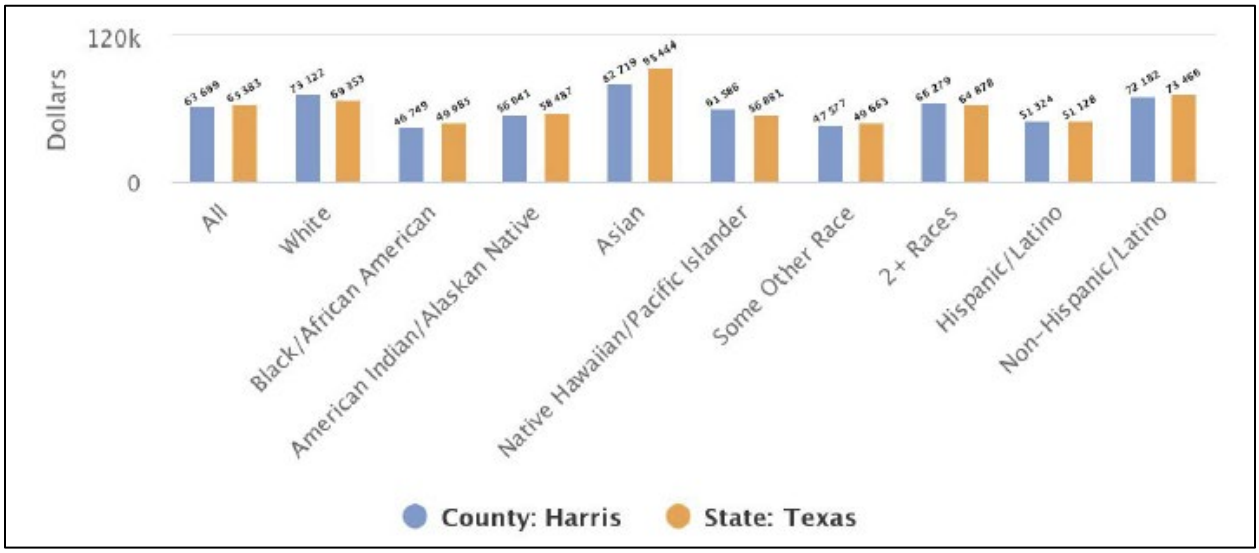


Figure 4.19: Median household income by race/ethnicity in Harris County compared to Texas.



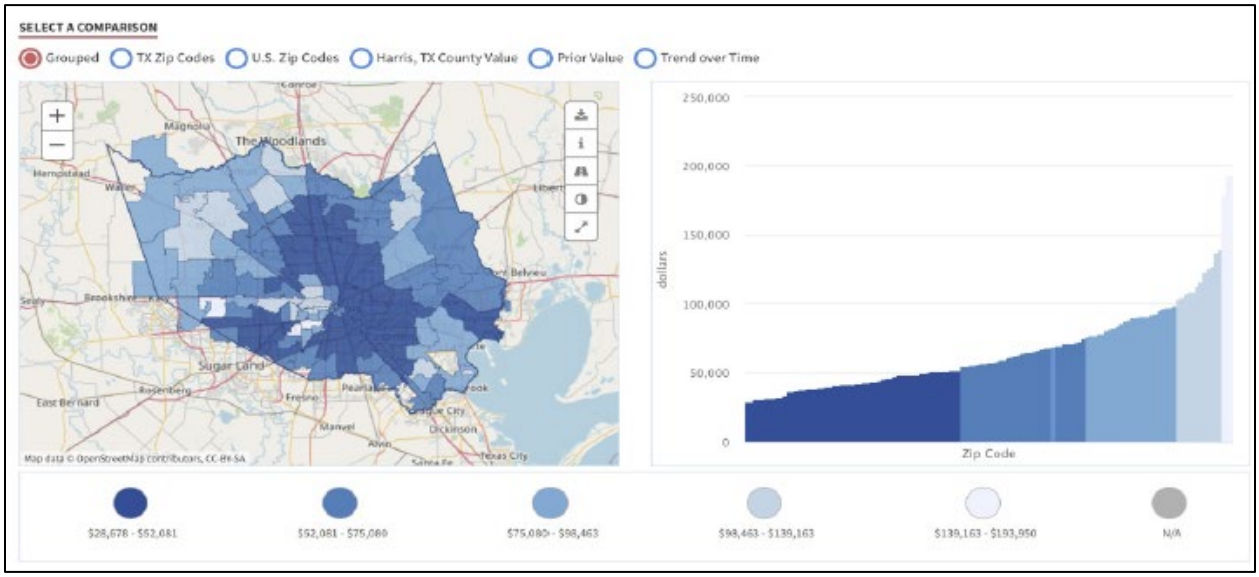
Source: Houston State of Health website, powered by Conduent Healthy Communities Institute 2021.

Note that the median household income for all races/ethnicity from the above source is significantly higher than US Census Data 2015-2019, at $63,699 compared to 52.338, respectively. Further, the median household income for both Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino (LatinX) residents of Harris County is significantly less than white and Asian residents, which corresponds to survey results. According to the Houston State of Health website, median household income reflects the relative affluence and prosperity of an area, which includes indicators of higher education levels, lower unemployment rates, better access to health care, better health outcomes, and more disposable income (Houston State of Health website 2021). This is important to ideas around vegan access and availability according to zip code location as well.

Figure 4.20 shows ranges of median household income according to zip code. In the figure, five ranges of median household income for Harris County were considered from the data source American Community Survey, maintained by Conduent Healthy Communities Institute, City of Houston, and Harris County. 129 zip code values are considered, with the lowest value at

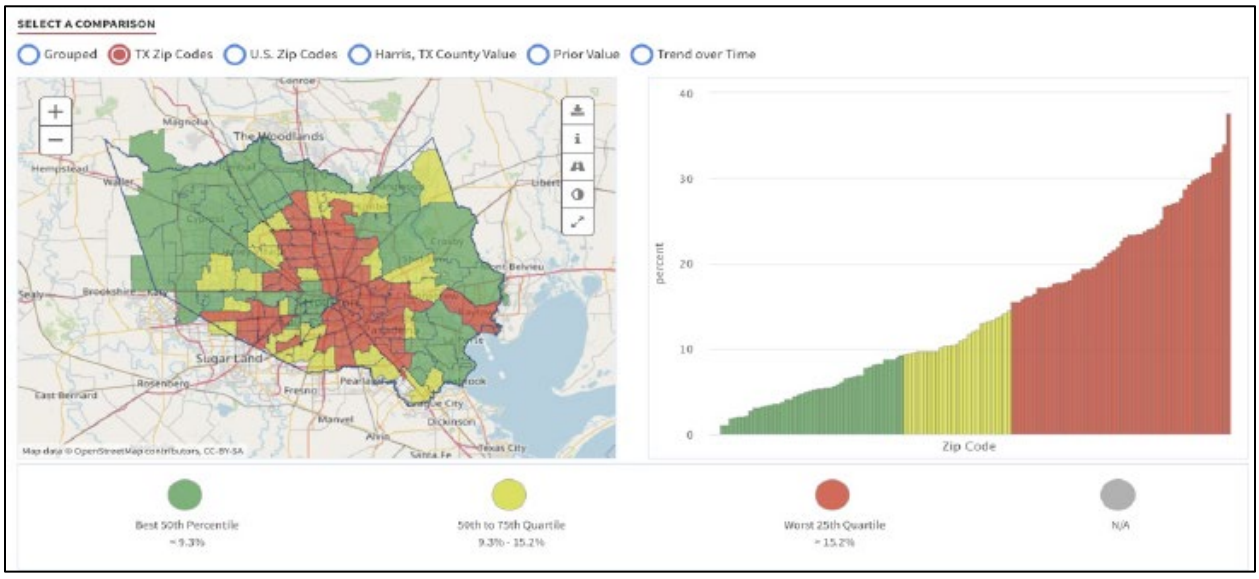
28,678 and the highest at 193,950. Median value is 57,167, closer to US Census data of $52,338 (2015-2019). Related to the lowest median household incomes shown in the darkest blue, to the north, east and south of downtown, is data showing families living below the poverty level, which is shown in Figure 4.21.

Figure 4.20: Median household income ranges in Harris County by zip code.



Source: Houston State of Health website, powered by Conduent Healthy Communities Institute 2021.

Figure 4.21: Families living below the federal poverty level in Harris County by zip code.



Source: Houston State of Health website, powered by Conduent Healthy Communities Institute 2021.

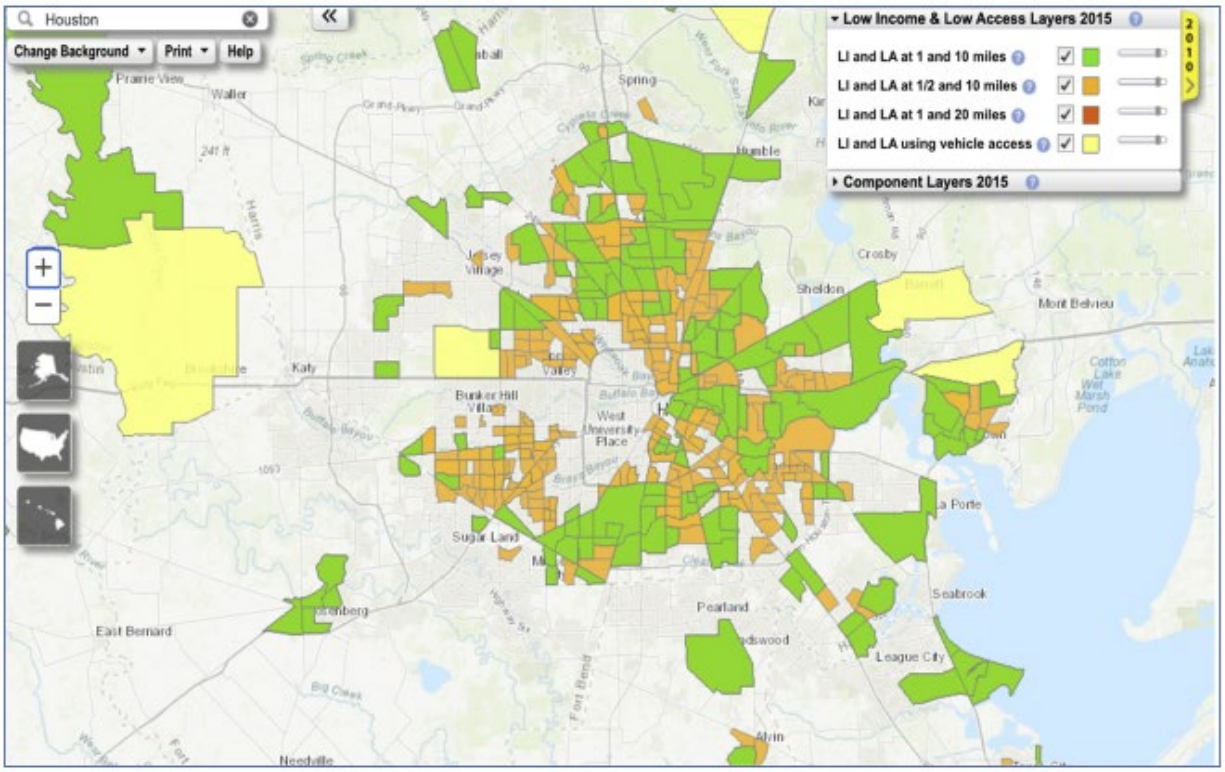
In Figure 4.21, the red areas represent zip codes with the highest percentage of families living below the federal poverty level. According to the Houston State of Health website, a high poverty rate is both a cause and a consequence of poor economic conditions, and may be an indicator of decreased buying power, which relates this to the structural barrier of access and privilege to choose vegan products or not to choose cheap animal-based products in the form of fast food. In addition, several of the survey zip codes fall into the red areas on this map, as well as the darker blue areas of the previous map (lowest median household income), for a total of 14 out of 50 zip codes where survey participants reside as "at-risk" for having a high percentage of families living below the federal poverty level. A familiar pattern arises from areas to the north, east, southeast, and southwest of downtown. This has implications for barriers to veganism in terms of cost, transporation and convenience as well.

With 30 out of 109 participants living in lower-income zip codes, as well as 11 participants from 7 rural zip codes outside Harris County which are also considered lower income areas, I also looked at maps showing food deserts and food insecurity in Houston. According to the U.S Department of Agriculture, a food desert is an area where at least a third of the population lives more than a mile away from a supermarket in urban areas and greater than ten miles away for rural areas (USDA 2009). The USDA offers an interactive map which can help identify food deserts in both urban and rural areas (see Fig. 4.22).

Figure 4.22 shows Low Income (LI) and Low Access (LA) Layers (2015) for census tracts in the greater Houston area. Note how there is a clear pattern of low income/low access areas to the north, east and south of central Houston. The relatively higher-income or privileged areas of Houston are to the west of downtown Houston, located in the center of the map within the inner loop (610). Some rural areas are also shown to be low-income and low access, with the

added issue of lack of a vehicle to drive to the supermarket. Note the high degree of overlap between the food desert map, the poverty level map, and the median household income map.

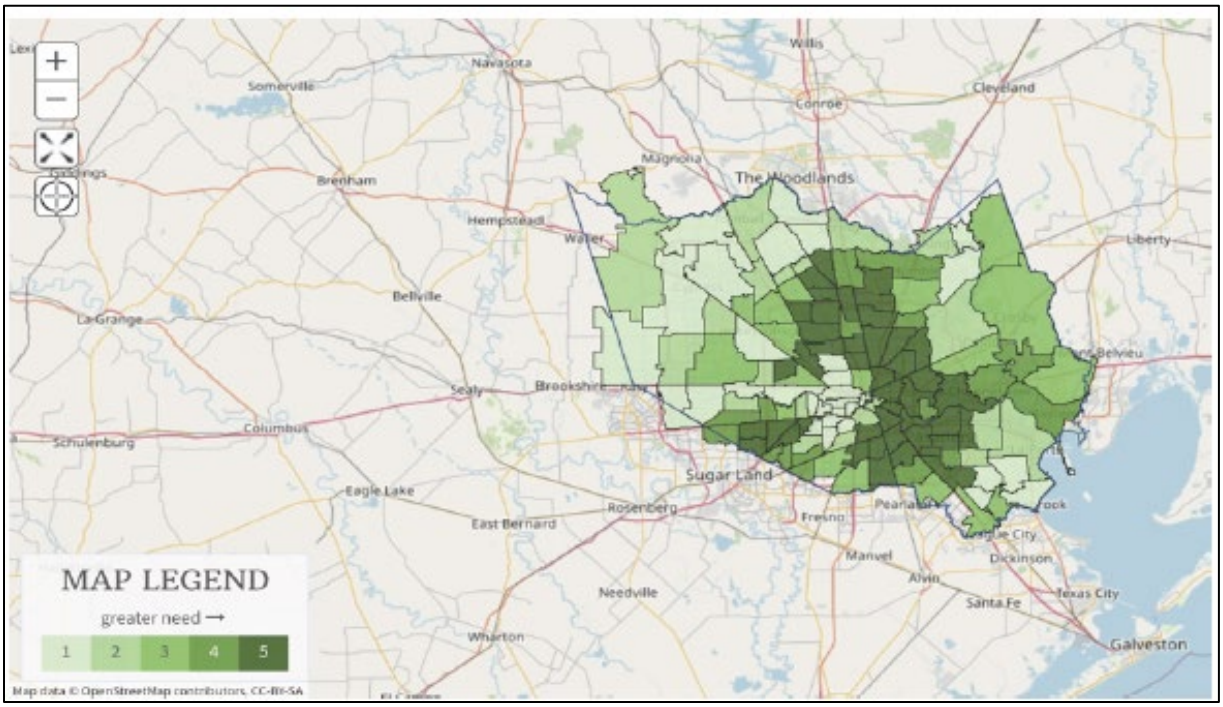
Figure 4.22: Food deserts and low-income areas of Greater Houston.



Source: USDA Food Access Research Atlas 2021.

Food insecurity is related to low-income and low-access areas of Greater Houston as indicated in Figure 4.23 which shows the 2020 Food Insecurity Index for Harris County. The Food Insecurity Index is a measure of food access that is correlated with economic and household hardship calculated by social and economic factors ranging from household expenditures to perceived health status that may impact a household's ability to access and purchase food (Houston State of Health 2021). The highest index values (shown in darkest green) are found in the same zip code areas which are associated with food deserts, families living below the poverty level, and lowest range of median household incomes in the similar pattern as the maps above, which is further evidence of the interrelated nature of these indicators.

Figure 4.23: Harris County Food Insecurity Index.



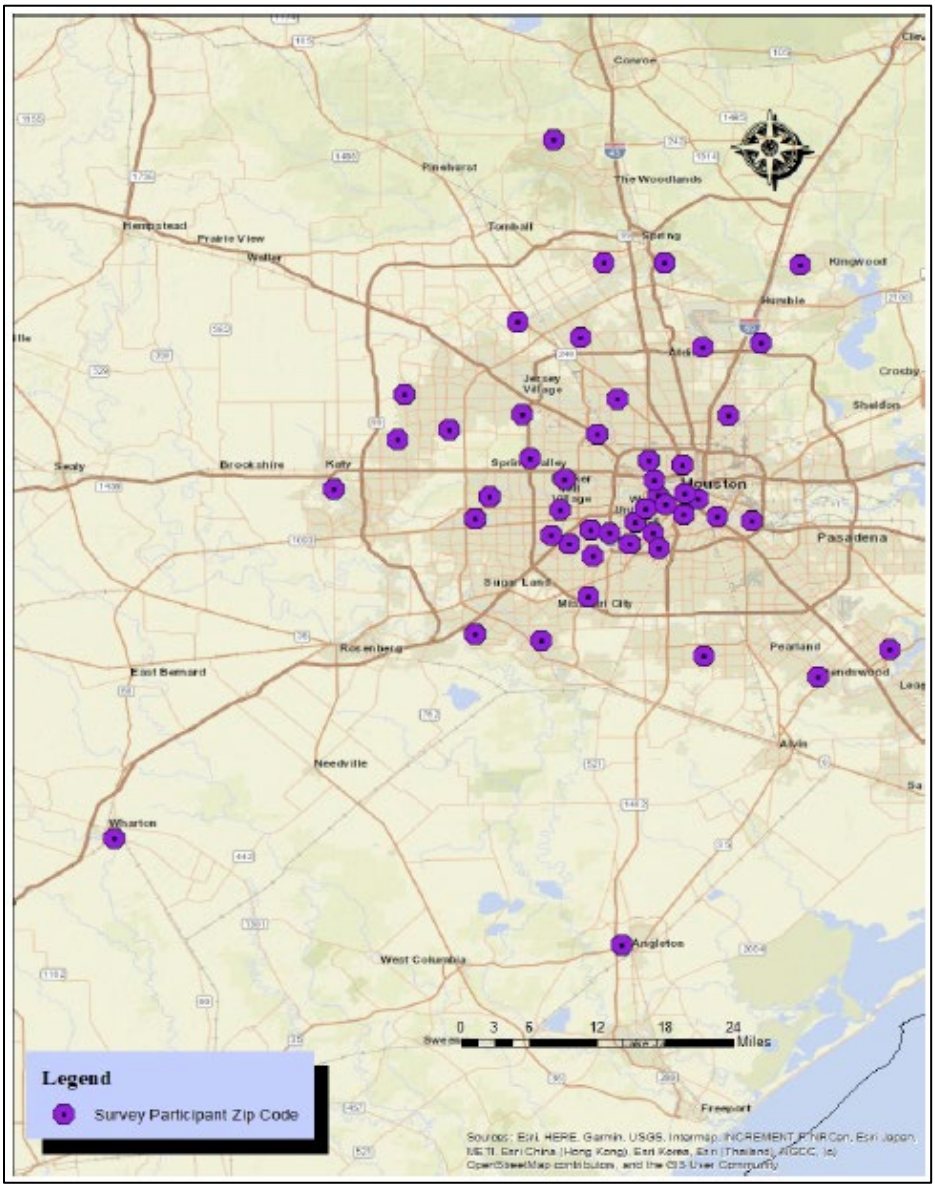
Source: Houston State of Health website, powered by Conduent Healthy Communities Institute 2021.

Another indicator of lack of access to healthy foods and food insecurity resides in the Distressed Communities Index (DCI) created by researchers from the Economic Innovation Group (EIG). This research examines economically distressed zip codes across the US. Of the 45 zip codes in Harris County that are economically distressed according to these metrics such as median income ratio and poverty rate, eight are majority Black and 28 are majority-Hispanic. Further, distressed zip codes are consistent with low-income, low-access areas which wrap around the prosperous zip codes west of downtown. The EIG also found that no majority-white zip codes in Houston or Harris County are distressed (Olin, 5 November.2020).

In consideration of how survey participants might fit into these interactive maps, I revisited a map showing the majority of survey participants in metro Houston (Fig. 4.24). I found that while the majority of participants reside in inner loop communities which are centrally located, to the southwest and west of downtown in what are considered privileged and more

prosperous areas of Houston, there are a number of participants who reside in what are considered low-income and low-access areas of Greater Houston to the northwest, north, northeast, east of downtown, which are consistent with food deserts and economically distressed zip codes. As well, some southwest and rural areas around Alvin and Angleton to the south and Wharton to the far west are considered food deserts in terms of access to fresh and healthy foods.

Figure 4.24: Zip code locations where survey participants reside.



Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, USGS, Intermap, INCREMENT P, NRCan, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), Esri Korea, Esri (Thailand), NGCC, OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community.

I concluded that many of these participants were looking to a vegan community for support in access to fresh vegetables, plant-based foods, and a way to take a stand against hyper-consumerism of fast food which is usually meat-centric, unhealthy in nature, and targeted at poorer demographics. This and other realizations lead me to further surmise that veganism in Houston as a lifestyle movement is sometimes expressed through the breaking of barriers around access, especially for low-income and low-access residents who attended events hosted by VSOP or events where VSOP maintains a presence. At a table conversation, one participant who is on a strict budget stated: "I feel like I have learned to do vegan meals on the cheap. I got all this stuff at Aldi and it wasn't even $30, and I could make so many meals from that as opposed to eating meat. Your tally is so much higher because meat is more expensive (Observation, June Potluck 2018). However, there is much to be done in order to make vegan foods and products available to more people who live in economically distressed areas of Houston where even a trip to Aldi is not always an option. As Dina stated, corner stores are not vegan-friendly (Dina, Interview 2018).

In an article from September 2020, a local media outlet expressed that more than 500,000 Houstonians live in food deserts with little to no access to healthy fresh foods. Further, food insecurity is much higher in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (Ojeda, 20 September.2020). The message of veganism can be utilized for good around making fresh and healthy vegan foods available for more vegan-curious Houstonians, but as most of the low-income and low-access areas are made up predominantly of often marginalized and structurally oppressed POC, it is imperative for a race-conscious veganism to be addressed and issues of privilege and whiteness around veganism to be thwarted. Further, I found that vegan food trucks, caterers and home delivery operations, as well as VSOP as a hub for information and knowledge about "how to be a

vegan in a non-vegan world" have much potential for addressing these problems around food deserts, food insecurity, and race-conscious veganism in Houston.

4.3.10 More Structural Barriers: Hyper-Consumerism, Commodification of Animals, Factory Farming, and Labelling

In consideration of the food system itself as a structural barrier to veganism, I considered the connections between consumers, producers and the political economy of factory farming, which is built around the commodification of animals. Beginning with survey data, I considered perceptions of barriers to veganism by survey participants. In response to the question, "If vegan-curious, what are the main obstacles," a total of 47 participants responded "yes" to the following obstacles: Giving up dairy/eggs (n = 24); Social Exclusion (n = 15); Access (n = 11); Cost (n = 8); Protein (n = 5); and Medical (n = 4). From these results, I found that the biggest obstacle for vegan-curious survey participants was giving up dairy and eggs (51.1%). Further, I found that vegan-curious interview participants, especially vegetarians, stated that giving up dairy and eggs is a major obstacle to going vegan. As with interview participants, I was also surprised that cost and access were not greater barriers to veganism for survey participants. Further, protein and medical reasons appeared to not have much impact as barriers for both survey and interview participants. In fact, most stated that plant-based protein was better for health reasons, which also relates back to the biological myth around veganism. What stood out most was the fact that giving up dairy and eggs was a barrier for more than half of participants who identified as vegan-curious. This prompted me to look more in-depth at the food system around these industries, as well as the commodification of animals in general in the factory farming system. However, from my observations, discussions and interviews, I felt the need to first look at the role of the consumer, which is preliminary to understanding how the demand for animal products has led to factory farming as a major structural barrier to veganism.

4.3.10.1 Hyper-Consumerism

Many participants believe consumerism in the present day is actually hyper-consumerism, or consuming for consumption's sake, which relates back to Castree's arguments around capitalist commodification (Castree 2003). Oftentimes, hyper-consumerism is believed to be associated with unconscious responses to advertising via television, radio and internet, which results in "mindless eating." The idea follows that it is second nature, for example to order a pepperoni pizza or go through a fast-food drive-through for a burger and fries. Vegan participants believe the great majority of the status quo population in the US does not think twice about these things, as convenience, taste, and in some cases food addictions are powerful forces beyond their control. Further, consumer demand for animal products is understood as the driving force behind the factory farming industry. As Dmitri described: "The number of animals that are bred and killed depends upon consumer demand. A lot of people miss that point. A lot of people watch the video and say, 'How horrible it is.' But don't realize the connection to their own behavior" (Dmitri, Interview 2018). However, Yogita and other vegan newcomers shared that they also understand that vegan foods are not always available or affordable for the majority of non-vegan consumers (Yogita, Interview 2018). Hyper-consumerism is further related to ideas around so-called "foodies." Yogita stated she knows a lot of "foodies," as they are called, because they "live to eat as opposed to eat to live […] they would rather eat something that is tasty according to them than think about any other consequences" (Yogita, Interview 2018).

Also related to the belief that hyper-consumerism of animal products is a barrier to veganism are specific barriers around types of animal products, including dairy and eggs. First, participants believe dairy products are the ubiquitous component of most American processed foods, and milk and its derivatives, especially whey protein, are difficult to avoid. For many

vegans, cheese is the last food to go and the greatest barrier separating non-vegan vegetarians from vegans. Eggs were most often referred to by participants as chicken eggs produced by hens raised in battery cages, a cruel confinement technique utilized to maximize profit at the expense of animal welfare. Participants believe that even in so-called "free-range" operations, hens are still property and therefore exploited. Further the belief continues that hens have been bred to lay many more egg than they would naturally, which leads to reproductive disease and early death. Eggs from backyard chickens, pet chickens, sanctuaries, and small farms are also considered ethically unsound by some but not all vegans, due to the health problems associated with overlaying of eggs. However, some vegans see these situations as a "lesser evil."

4.3.10.2 Commodification of Animals

Participants in this study believe that animals produced at the scale and magnitude of the factory farming system are indeed commodities. This belief motivates practices and is also a major factor for the desire to separate oneself from carnist ideologies which reside in the factory farming animal industrial complex. Participants believe commodification of animals perpetuates outdated ideals such as meat as a centerpiece of every meal, three times a day. Further, participants believe commodification of animals enables speciesism to thrive and persist into the near future. Sal recalled a documentary in which animals are just treated like a commodity: "Nobody cares about how they feel or what they… how they live." He emphasized that while *no one wants to see the suffering of animals* which commodification of animals entails in the factory farm setting, in this nation, "it is all about the money." He also believes trying to change that on a political level is "an understatement to say difficult." "If you can make it beneficial for the people who produce or create the atrocities. If you make beneficial for them somehow to not do so, then they will not" (Sal, Interview 2018).

Some participants believe vegans and non-vegans alike must consider the health of the animals which are to be consumed entering the food system, as they have often lived in filthy conditions, having been confined in spaces not natural to their correct expression of species, and fed things they would never eat in the wild. Participants often shared they believe the animals are injected with antibiotics in order to survive their unnatural confinement. Participants further believe this translates to human health concerns. The diffusion of the belief "you are what you eat" was pervasive throughout interviews, presentations and observations, which was also supportive of health as a motivation for vegan-curious participants. In other words, vegan regulars believe that even if humans do not give moral consideration to the conditions in which the animals are raised and produced, they might find reason to protect their own health from these conditions.

Related to the belief that animals are confined unnaturally, issues of scale are commonly held beliefs around the commodification of animals. I recalled that Firion believed factory farming was a "scaled-up and capitalized industry built on the ideas of *carnism*, ownership, and exploitation of other animals" (Firion, Interview 2018). Moreover, Jory pictures 30,000 chickens "crammed into tiny, little spaces" (Jory, Interview 2018). Yogita pointed out that the scale at which dairy and eggs need to be produced for the consumers, "I don't think there is any way to treat the animals ethically or in a humane way to get that" (Yogita, Interview 2018).

4.3.10.3 Factory Farming

Factory farming is understood by participants in terms of supply and demand, the profit motive of neoliberal capitalism, the government, food industry corporations, and corruption. Many participants referred to supply and demand as the "crux" of the non-vegan political economy. In other words, the more people buy meat and other animal products, the more the

system responds. Participants also believe that the bottom line of a factory farming political economy, which is formed by the interactions of producers and consumers, is that the number of animals that are bred and killed, or produced, depends on *consumer demand*. Thus, the importance of going vegan for the animals and engaging in political consumerism which subverts the normalized commodification of animals.

Some participants argue that the political economy of factory farming is based on neoliberal capitalism. In other words, one approach sees the solution through consumerism, while the second sees it through a critique (and need to change) of production and state policy. Sal and others believe that in a neoliberal economy, the profit-margin for the producer is the most important factor in the production of animal products:

> The government works hand in hand with the industry; this strengthens the capitalist marriage between industry and government, and heavy-duty lobbyists play an integral role as well. It is easy money, right? Raising things, killing them, making a profit (Sal, Interview 2018).

Regarding the profit motive, Dina stated she believes factory farming is all about speed of production, "no matter who gets hurt or what creature it affects… and it just goes right down to the money" (Dina, Interview 2018). Further, cost is an issue in the political economy of factory farming. As Sissy pointed out, the meat industry is subsidized [by the government], which is an externalized cost, "so you're going to get meat much cheaper than what it really cots to produce it" (Sissy, Interview 2018). Further, since factory farming makes food "cheap," bringing production costs down at the expense of animal welfare, most participants see factory farming as a major barrier to veganism.

Manuela believes government has a lot to do with people continuing to eat animals (Manuela, Interview 2018). As Hope stated, "Government will support the corporate farmers, subsidize them, keep them in business" (Hope, Interview 2018). However, Veva believes people

are realizing that they don't want to be lied to by the government: “This milk is good for your kids, these hotdogs are good for your kids, your yogurt is good for you, your steak that you love. It's killing you. People are paying literally to kill themselves is what is happening” (Veva, Interview 2018). Bobo also considered the food pyramid, “which was created by the government influenced by the food industry”: “We had the four basic food groups. What a crock of dung. And you were just taught this as if this was science, but it had nothing to do with anything. It wasn’t even healthy” (Bobo, Interview 2018).

Jasper also referred to government-sponsored legislation and laws against animal activism, which he related to the power of money and corporate influence, “grotesque laws passed so you can’t show videos of what is really going on in slaughterhouses” (Jasper, Interview 2018). As well, Yogita believes “the businesspeople try to stop laws being enforced in the food industry,” citing bureaucracy and propaganda as motivators (Yogita, Interview 2018). Furthermore, according to Tanja, ambivalence about animal issues informs a sense of morality which results in our laws: “If our laws reflected animal/human equality, that would be a step in the right direction, but our ignorance and ambivalence result in this problematic system of oppression. Laws cannot fix the problem; a shift in perception is what is needed. You can’t legislate a problem away, as policies are downstream of attitudes” (Tanja, interview 2018).

Participants further believe the power and authority of the government under neoliberal capitalism is subsumed by the corporation’s interests. According to several participants, producers in the factory farming industry entail supply-side power and upholding of the commodification of animals, especially the corporate CEOs of food industry giants like Tyson and Smithfield, McDonald’s and Chick Fil-A, and Wal-Mart. Further, Gaia noted that the corporations are tied to so many other businesses, “like the American Heart Association is tied to

Tyson chicken" (Gaia, Interview 2018). Participants also believe politicians matter to food industry lobbyists and advertisers, while pharmaceutical companies, health costs and subsidies further tie the government to the rise of "the corporation as the true head of state."

Finally, participants believe factory farming within the greater political economy is a corrupt system of production related to the greed of individuals at the top of production as well as lobbyist influencers. Rachael pointed out that corrupt companies often sponsor corrupt politicians [and vice versa], and "big money controls everything" (Rachael, Interview 2018). Rory and Valentina consider factory farming as "atrocious": "It's too much, just too much money" (Rory and Valentina, Interview 2018). Gaia and D'Marco related the greed and corruption to Genesis 29:

> America is such a Christian nation, and Texas is all about cattle… did we forget about [Genesis 29] when God was like 'You know, everything on this planet, I made for you to eat. Go ahead and get those apples and these plants. I put this here for you.' You know. *Don't touch this tree. Don't touch this tree. That tree is factory farming.*

However, some participants stated factory farms are not necessary for people today to go vegan. For example, Dmitri stated he would be against eating meat even if factory farms did not exist, as he went vegetarian long before he heard of them. But the fact that they *do exist* means even if someone believes philosophically "it's okay to kill animals for food, if they're against the torture of animals, they'd have to go vegan just because of the way farm animals are treated." Further Dmitri considers factory farming a perversion of nature:

> There is no way to mass produce meat in the quantity that is currently being eaten, in the traditional way, the family farm way. Indigenous groups who hunt their food in the same way the animals do is part of their ecology, but what we do is a perversion of nature: we breed animals for slaughter, hurting the environment by doing so.

4.3.10.4 Labelling and the Humane Myth

Labelling, which is tied to ideas and beliefs around the humane myth, is also seen as a

barrier to veganism, especially since vegetarian and vegan-curious individuals often "buy the lie" around labels. Labelling laws which participants cited most commonly refer to "grass-fed," "free-range," "cage-free" and "pasture-raised." Further, participants stated the "better welfare" and "humane meat/dairy/eggs" give people the illusion that the animals are being well-treated.

Jory related labelling to "pure marketing that doesn't actually mean anything." Instead, he calls for standardized, transparent labelling:

> You know, 'cage free', what does that mean? Be more explicit or show a picture. Do something like a cigarette container. That would be awesome to have on animal products, like hey, this is what the inside of a slaughterhouse looks like where these animals were.

For other participants like Dmitri, labelling laws are an illusion which even animal advocacy campaigns believe:

> I think the stuff labeled free range and organic, just creates the illusion that the animals are well-treated when they are not. This gives meat-eaters a false sense of security, and many animal advocacy campaigns are buying into the lie. They launch a campaign to make some marginal improvement, but in reality, policies and laws do not change. Modest reforms win in the short-term, giving this false assurance that the animals are being treated better in phases. But in reality, if someone were to actually see it, they would be appalled. So-called free-range and organic farms would be considered an abomination by most of the world religions in terms of how animals should be treated.

Finally, labelling is seen as misleading for consumers like Sydney, a vegetarian and occasional visitor:

> The trend to market to a certain segment of society is misleading as they pay more for something that is not true. It is the local farmers who know, grass-fed milk and regular milk come from the same cow. Everything is grass-fed, so in that sense they are telling the truth. When they say free-range chickens, these are chickens in the middle of an enclosure. The standards of labelling are misleading.

For Thelma Louise, a vegetarian newcomer, labelling does not show the whole picture: "It doesn't tell you that the animals are given antibiotics and hormones a lot of times, or that they're taken away from their parents. So, there's a whole lot that could be more included on a label." While she also stated she was one of the people who "bought into the grass fed, free range

labels on meat products and dairy," she became concerned when her awareness was heightened about the differences between free-range and the non-free range (Thelma Louise, Interview 2018).

In this chapter, I have considered VSOP as a CofP through motivations for going vegan, hierarchies related to core and peripheral membership, practices, beliefs, and identity construction, which further serves to tie this community of practice in Houston to the greater vegan lifestyle movement. I have further considered barriers to veganism, including the structural barriers associated with vegan privilege and whiteness, and the political economy of factory farming, which is also a critique of vegan political consumerist practices. In the following chapter, I present a discussion linking theory to practice and an overview of the deliverables for the client VSOP, beginning with group symbolism and meaning of the acronym P.E.A.C.E. as well as suggestions for improvement to program outreach.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND DELIVERABLES

5.1 Overview of Discussion and Deliverables

This chapter provides a synthesis of theoretical engagements and findings, as well as suggestions for the client VSOP based on ideas and strategies for outreach and growth of the vegan community in Houston. By showing how I have linked theory to practice, I further demonstrate how the vegan CofP may be understood in terms of subcultures and the vegan lifestyle movement, creating a dialogue between community of practice theory, subcultural studies, and social movement theory. This addresses the primary research question: How are vegans and vegan-curious newcomers in Houston creating, building, and maintaining a community of practice which contributes to vegan subcultures and the greater vegan lifestyle movement? As well, I provide models for better understanding the structure of the vegan CofP, taking into account core and peripheral membership, the idea of choosing to remain peripheral, apprenticeship, hierarchies, group norms and expectations, and a detailed look at practices. I also consider the notion of identity construction within the vegan CofP and show the relationship to Bourdieu's ideas of the *habitus*, which provides an interesting link to practice theory. Further, group symbolism and the meaning of the acronym PEACE to participants is an expression of vegan identity and a useful way to understand how identity is constructed through discourse and common values associated with veganism.

In consideration of strategies for addressing barriers to community-building, I first provide a summary of suggestions made by participants for improved outreach and group organization. I then revisit findings and analysis related to vegan privilege and whiteness on the one hand, and hyper-consumerism and the capitalist commodification of animals on the other.

Race-conscious veganism and socio-spatial epistemologies (Harper 2012) around the vegan movement in Houston are also explored. As well, I show how personal barriers for participants may be understood in terms of structural barriers of access and privilege, as well in the context of the political economy of factory farming. Finally, I relate Castree's (2003) ideas of alienability and alienation from one's food to hyper-consumerism and mindless eating, a major structural barrier related to the political economy of factory farming. These connections are supportive of strategies for outreach and growth of the vegan community in Houston, which are the main focus for deliverables to the client VSOP. The deliverables answer the questions: What does the group mean to participants? What are the barriers to going vegan in Houston? What strategies can be implemented to bring vegan and vegan-curious newcomers back to the monthly potlucks and other events? I conclude with a reflection on the project focused on the concept of rupture and ideas for moving forward.

5.2 Communities of Practice, Subcultures, and Social Movements

As discussed in section 4.2, the client VSOP has developed a community of practice (CofP) around the shared interests, motivations and passion of vegan and vegan-curious individuals for animals, health, and the environment. I further connected VSOP as a CofP to subcultural affiliations associated with the three distinct populations which Sydney identified as VSOP newcomers: the animal activists, the health activists, and the environmental activists (Sydney, Interview 2018). This is evidence that the culture of veganism is comprised of many different subcultures and philosophies (Harper 2011, 222). I also found that subcultures around veganism are focused on the subversion to normalcy which differentiates them from the larger culture (Hebdige 1979) around the normalization of consuming animals and animal products. These subcultural affiliations were most often identified through the practices of activism and

political consumerism, but also through volunteer opportunities, as in Rory and Valentina's VegFest and vegan festival adventures at VegFest Austin and beyond. Armed with the message of veganism to spread awareness at the huge VegFest celebrations held in these cities annually, Rory and Valentina also volunteered at the VSOP Vegan Thanks-Living (November 2018), and stated they would like to volunteer at Rowdy Girl and the Chicken Rescue in the future (Rory and Valentina, Interview 2018). As I came to better understand volunteering as a form of activism, I looked deeper into the specifics of what it means to be a vegan activist in Houston as a member of this vegan CofP, with hopes of tying activism to subcultural affiliations. This connection further serves to understand the main research question, which asks how VSOP as a CofP is building community through its affiliations with vegan subcultures in Houston and with respect to the greater vegan lifestyle movement.

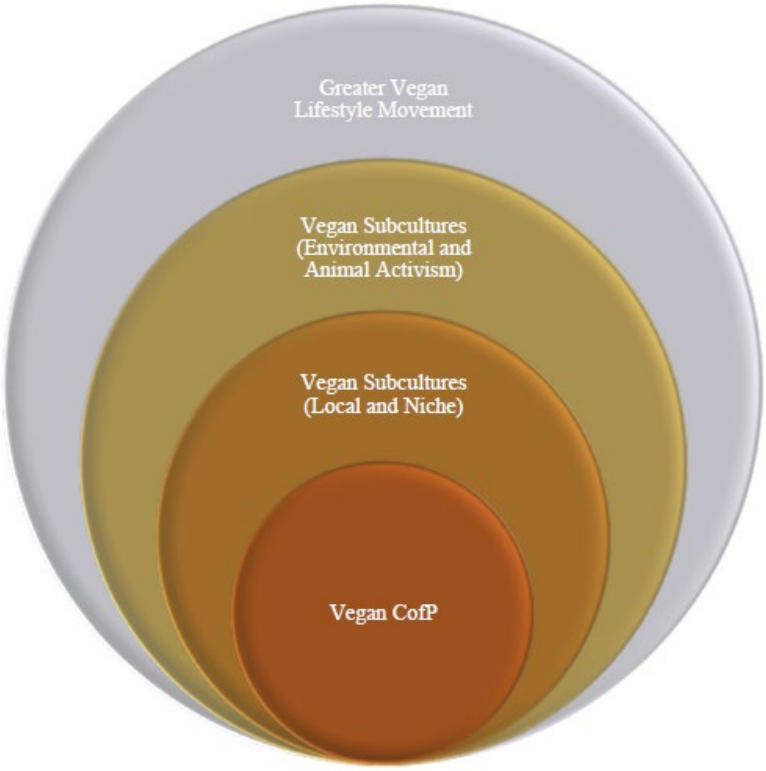
As many participants shared, they felt misunderstood and often rejected by carnist norms and attitudes towards their veganism, even in the context of close family members, which is also a barrier to going vegan. This also connects to Hebdige's assertion that subcultures are often perceived as negative due to the nature of criticism to the dominant social order, yet they bring together like-minded individuals who feel neglected by societal standards and allow them to develop a sense of identity (Hebdige 1979). Especially for newcomers to VSOP, membership in a vegan CofP relates to the idea of the "urban tribe," which provides a sense of belonging and safety around practicing veganism in the sense of subcultural affiliations. As Maya stated, the group means "strength in numbers" (Maya, Interview 2018), and for Marty, the group is like "finding a long-lost friend" (Marty, Interview 2018). Further, political consumerist practices of members of VSOP are evidence of Gelder's ideas around the "consumer tribe" as subcultural affiliation (Gelder 2007). Indeed, hegemonic forces around the political economy of factory

farming are rich fodder for subversion through political consumerism and the sense of belonging which happens in communities of practice as a subset of larger vegan subcultures, especially in the form of urban mainstream culture and internet affiliations. In the recent past, these occurred in the form of punk, goth and rave; nowadays, I have witnessed a shift to YouTubers and Instagram vegans (Observations 2018-2019), all with the same messages to resist capitalist hyper-consumerism and mindless eating by trying veganism for health, for the environment, and especially for the animals. I noticed that vegan activism is *in itself* both a subculture and one of the main practices in the vegan CofP. Activism binds newcomers and regular members to one another in the subversion of normalcy around consuming animals and animal products, which I witnessed as the mere fact of attending the "vegan barbecue" next to a neighboring pavilion of "real barbecue" (Observation, March 2019).

As referenced in 4.2.3 Practices, activist subgroup affiliations such as the rodeo and barbecue protestors are also subcultural affiliations, as these gatherings bring together like-minded individuals in the subversion of normalcy around the entire "cattle culture" of Houston which is seen as a carnist form of unnecessary exploitation of animals. Further, vegan subcultures in Houston thrive on the internet, as this is the way in which Facebook activist groups plan their protests and other gatherings such as slaughterhouse vigils or hanging banners off freeway bridges. Niche groups such as Sal's "heavy metal vegan subculture," sanctuary and rescue organizations, as well as health groups around Dr. Montgomery's raw vegan cleanses, raw vegan meetups, and raw vegan Facebook groups are also supportive of vegan subcultural affiliations. I also witnessed the larger subcultural affiliations with environmental groups which place animal exploitation and factory farming in the context of bigger issues like climate change. As participants in VSOP as a CofP are also members of subcultures related to these forms of

activism, this is further evidence of the interrelated and integral association between the vegan CofP and vegan subcultures.

Figure 5.1: Venn diagram showing vegan CofP, vegan subcultures, greater vegan lifestyle movement.



As stated in section 2.2.2, I chose to focus on the idea of veganism as a "lifestyle movement," which focuses less on traditional political mobilization and more on people's everyday lifestyle choices, actively promoting a lifestyle as their primary means to foster social change (Cherry 2015). Further, I found it important to distinguish between "subculture" and "movement" with respect to tying the CofP to either, yet there is a certain amount of overlap. Indeed, a community of practice which is subverting norms around mainstream consumption of animals becomes like a subculture, and any number of subcultures around veganism in Houston are engaged in the formation of a vegan lifestyle movement, with moments of transition from subculture to movement understood in terms of moral pressure to widen the range of causes

(Gelder 2010). I also considered Cherry's relational approach, which asserts that there are arguably more practicing vegans in the US than members of vegan organizations (2006, 156). However, vegans who are engaged in activism are increasingly members of Facebook activist groups which are also subcultures. My findings are compatible with Cherry's relational approach regarding the diffuse nature of the vegan lifestyle movement. As such, I have found Figure 5.1 helpful in understanding the nature of the relationship between the vegan CofP, vegan subcultures in Houston, and the greater vegan lifestyle movement.

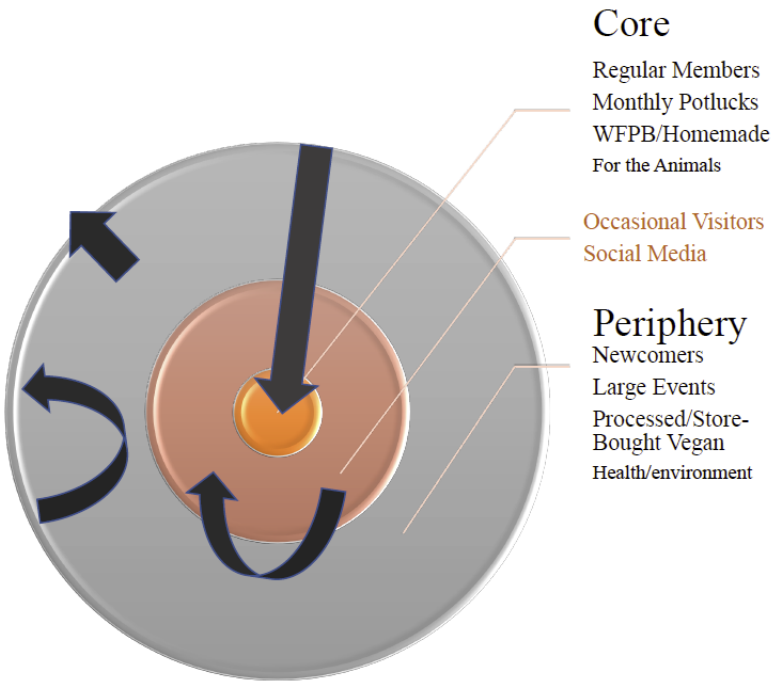
As Figure 5.1 shows, the vegan CofP is a fundamental and integral component of vegan subcultural affiliations through practices, especially activism. The greater vegan lifestyle movement is strengthened by these subcultural affiliations and the practice of political consumerism within the vegan CofP. As Wright (2018, 2) stated, veganism is marked by conscious individual actions that stand in stark opposition to the consumer mandate of capitalism. As well, Cherry (2006, 157) asserted that vegans represent a *new form of social movement* that is not based on legislation or identity politics but instead on everyday *practices* in one's lifestyle. The diagram is further supportive of ideas around recruitment through the vegan CofP into the lifestyle movement and shows how subcultural affiliations provide a segue into the vegan lifestyle movement. The diagram is also indicative of an aspect of diffusion of practices as one moves from vegan CofP through subcultural affiliations into the greater vegan lifestyle movement. In-person meetups in the form of potluck gatherings and event attendance are strengthened by further participation in practices which stretch beyond the vegan CofP into locales across Greater Houston and across virtual spaces of the internet and social media. The diagram shows a crucial relationship between the vegan CofP, vegan subcultural affiliations and the greater vegan lifestyle movement which provides one of the answers to the main research

question around ways in which vegan and vegan-curious members of VSOP creating, building, and maintaining a vegan CofP through these relationships. By considering community of practice theory in relation to subcultural studies and social movement theory, this thesis also provides an important link between anthropology and sociology in this respect. Finally, by connecting VSOP as a community of practice to vegan subcultures and the broader vegan social or "lifestyle" movement, I am better able to contextualize and disseminate my findings towards the greater aim of contributing to current and future literature in these fields of inquiry, as well as providing a broader context for the client in my deliverables.

5.3 Models for the Vegan CofP

In this discussion, I also found it useful to create two models for better understanding the hierarchical relationships between regular and newcomer participants of VSOP as a CofP. The first model provides a visual reference in understanding core and peripheral membership, ideas of apprenticeship, as well as normative tendencies of the group (see Fig. 5.2).

Figure 5.2: Model of VSOP as a CofP: Core and periphery



As stated in section 4.2.2, varying forms of community membership are important to the structure of VSOP as a CofP. Along with the Board Members, Coordinators and other essential members of the organization, those who regularly attended the monthly potlucks and stayed engaged in other larger events and social media comprise the core of VSOP's community of practice. The periphery is comprised of vegan and vegan-curious newcomers to the group, who sometimes become occasional visitors and stay engaged in social media platforms of VSOP. Further, these newcomers often arrived at VSOP through the larger events like VegFest Houston and "Walk for Animals, Walk for Peace," then decide to try the smaller potluck gatherings. Newcomers to the group are in a unique position of "situated learning" (Lave and Wenger 1991), whereby they are able to learn from regular members how to navigate the vegan lifeway. As newcomers learn how to navigate veganism through discourse and practices as experienced by core/regular members, there is a natural progression towards the center of the diagram, as shown by the longer black arrow in the diagram. As some newcomers become occasional visitors, they may not progress to becoming regular members, as they choose to engage via social media without attending events, as shown by the curved black arrow towards the center of the diagram. Other newcomers may try the large events once or twice and decide the group is not a good fit, as shown by the shortest black arrow. Still others may choose to remain engaged at the periphery without becoming occasional or regular members at all, shown by the curved black arrow towards the periphery of the diagram. There are as many reasons as newcomers in the choice to remain peripheral, and this is not an indicator of one's commitment to the vegan lifeway. Further, this is evidence of Cherry's assertion that there are arguably more practicing vegans in the US than members of vegan organizations (2006, 156). Moreover, some participants related to "lone wolf veganism," stating they do not need mentors in the group to be vegan and rely heavily

on self-education and internet sources of support. In general, I found that motivations, beliefs, practices, and identity construction served to bind some individual participants to VSOP as a CofP, while others chose to remain peripheral, or simply did not have or find the opportunity appealing or necessary to maintain their vegan status.

Learning and education about veganism was seen as a key component of group symbolism for interview participants. For example, Jasper stated that the group symbolizes education about the potential of lifestyle change, and just how beneficial veganism can be […] options, choice, and a variety of vegan foods which proves to be quite informative" (Jasper, Interview 2018). For Dina, it was "lovely to know that other families "are dealing with the same things you are going through [as a newcomer]; people willing to help you, answer questions, guide you […] you can turn to someone besides the internet to talk to" (Dina, Interview 2018). Finally, Tanja stated the group meant ""the passion and altruism of the teacher" (Tanja, Interview 2018). Wenger's (1998) assertion that learning is a fundamentally social process which proceeds in natural ways is a key idea around apprenticeship in the vegan CofP. This mutual engagement between newcomers and regulars is a key to growth of the community, as newcomers experience a form of apprenticeship in learning how to become vegan. In keeping with the idea of apprenticeship, I likened this example to Lave and Wenger's study of non-drinking alcoholics as well as 12-step meetings, whereby the alcoholic "goes above and beyond" in the early days of his recovery by showing up early to help set up the meetings and staying late to empty ashtrays and the like. The non-drinking alcoholic is focused on "giving up" alcohol, or that which does not serve his new purpose in joining the community of practice (AA). This would then increase his likelihood of success in a community of practice centered on successfully integrating new beliefs through frequency of meeting attendance. Similarly, in the

vegan CofP, vegan-curious newcomers are in the process of "giving up" animal-based products, learning new ways to negotiate meanings around veganism through practices which "old timers" (regular and core members) have been navigating for a longer period of time.

With respect to Eckert's (2006) focus on hierarchical aspects of core and peripheral membership in the CofP, I also looked at normative tendencies in the model. As Gaia stated, "You're supposed to go vegan *because of the animals*" (Gaia, Interview 2018). I noticed that many newcomers across all age ranges arrived at VSOP initially for health reasons, and some for the environment as well, yet as time progressed, they did identify with the core motivation of the group, which on its website identifies as a vegan [animal] abolitionist group. Therefore, I surmised that going vegan "for the animals" is indeed a normative and hierarchical aspect of the structure of the group. Regarding community-building, this aspect is subjectively constructed as either incentive or barrier to growth of the community, Further, I found it important to highlight the normative trend towards healthier "clean eating" as members moved from newcomer or periphery to regular or core status. Interestingly, I found there is an unspoken normative movement in this group by both vegan-curious and already vegan participants towards WFPB as a "higher state of veganism," yet "on the ground" observations proved otherwise, even for many core members and regulars. For example, at the VegFest Houston events, there was a preponderance of processed vegan foods, especially vegan sweets, which draw in newcomers to veganism. As Rachael stated, many vegan-curious people go straight for the "really sweet or other junk food" (Rachael, Interview 2018). At the potluck events, there was also a normative trend towards bringing homemade dishes versus store-bought, but for newcomers the store-bought items and dishes are completely understandable considering they are new to vegan cooking and recipes. I recalled that Sal took great pride in his vegan dishes and considered them

part of his vegan identity, which also relates to presentation and food aesthetics. However, even one of the Board members frequently brought a delicious store-bought vegan carrot cake to the monthly potlucks. In the larger vegan lifestyle movement, the potlucks also serve as a situated learning experience around preparing vegan foods to share with non-vegans at non-vegan gatherings. Indeed, participants related that the practice of bringing one's own food to non-vegan gatherings was seen as a "defense against the system of misunderstanding" which is also a barrier to veganism, helping them to fit into social settings where they would normally be excluded. For example, Maya stated she could "bring vegan sausages" to a barbecue with friends and they would not have to worry about "what to feed the vegan" (Maya, Interview 2018). In this respect, the processed vegan foods which both newcomers and regular members utilize in these defensive strategies are also a subversion to normative WFPB trends within the vegan CofP.

Figure 5.3: Model of VSOP Practices

The second model is focused on practices, which are the primary focus of the vegan CofP, informed by beliefs and identity construction. Practices are also the cornerstone of the binding qualities of the CofP and tie into the pervasive centripetal flow of information and growth towards the core of the first model. The model in figure 5.3 shows the seven main practices of VSOP as a CofP.

Regarding the practice of socialization and learning, the mere fact of attending the monthly potlucks and other vegan meetups, patronizing all-vegan restaurants, food trucks and other establishments, and attending larger annual events such as VegFest, are all part of the shared repertoire of vegan and vegan-curious practices which comprise the vegan CofP. These shared experiences over time and a commitment to shared understanding are "crucial in the conventionalization of meaning" in the CofP, a "mutual sense-making" about their place in the CofP and in the larger social order (Eckert 2006, 1). Since the pandemic of 2020, the use of technology and social media, especially the Zoom app, is also integral to understanding how practices will manifest for socialization across virtual space. It remains to be seen what changes will occur to the formation of social groups within VSOP as a CofP as the world transitions out of pandemic uncertainty to the future of vegan potlucks, VegFest Houston, and other VSOP-sponsored events and outreach.

Regarding the practice of volunteering, I found the volunteer experience is one of the main components of the repertoire of shared practices in the CofP, as it also served as a bridge between full-fledged regular (core) membership in VSOP and visitor/newcomer (peripheral) status. It is also a way for newcomers like Renate to maintain her "vegan lifestyle health habits" and engage in a "vegan network of support" (Renate, Interview 2018). Further, relating back to Lave and Wenger's study of non-drinking alcoholics and 12-step meetings,

volunteering to "take a meeting to a recovery center" is a way to give back to the community and maintain one's sobriety, or abstinence from alcohol. Similarly, volunteering to take the message of veganism to underserved communities in Houston may help the vegan newcomer maintain her "sobriety" and abstinence from animal-based products. The volunteer experience thus opened the possibilities for two vegan newcomers, Gaia and D'Marco, to not only move in the direction of core (regular) membership, but to also serve as "ambassadors" to Black communities in Houston, in order to bring in more POC (people of color) vegans to VSOP and to the greater vegan lifestyle movement in Houston, especially in resistance to structural health barriers and "lifestyle diseases" related to food and diet (Gaia and D'Marco, Interview 2018).

Similar to volunteering, the practices of activism and outreach serve as a bridge between newcomers and regular membership in VSOP as a CofP. Activism for some newcomers like Gaia "begins on your plate" and is an existential phenomenon: "choosing not to consume animal products, doing the "Walk for Animals, Walk for Peace," wearing a vegan T-shirt, and [just] being vegan" (Gaia, Interview 2018). Further, in tying his activism to the greater cause of going "vegan for the animals," Firion stated:

> We are better than this. In the commodification of life disposable, and since our parents gave us products wrapped in plastic, (referring to meat products in the meat aisle of grocery stores), veganism is a new thing to be mastered, yet it should not be this way. Instead, we need to look beyond ourselves and see how our choices affect others. It is progress, not perfection, in the quest to be loved, accepted and validated within vegan activism.

I recalled how I initially met Firion a year earlier during my exploratory research. He had arrived forty minutes late to the August 2017 Second Saturdays potluck with a big tray of vegan "barbecue un-chicken," having just left from a protest at a "real chicken barbecue" gathering (Observation, Exploratory Research 2017). Firion's "barbecue un-chicken" was thus a material representation of how activism ties into outreach, which is sending the message of veganism to

non-vegan consumers. As a newcomer to veganism myself in 2017, Firion's expression of the vegan message was made clear, and I came to better understand how newcomers in the vegan CofP learn to become regular/core members. However, I also became aware of a resistance to "preachy vegans" by members of the group, which is also extended to vegan advertising in the greater vegan lifestyle movement. In essence, as Sal related, "people do not like to be told that what they are doing is wrong," referring to non-vegan resistance to the vegan message (Sal, Interview 2018).

The practice of giving testimonials about conversion to veganism and storytelling are related in that they are both discursive methods which relate to motivations for going vegan, usually regarding animal ethics and the moral imperative related to values associated with the concept of *ahimsa*: compassion, a greater purpose related to saving the environment, nonviolence, and creaturely connection. Testimonials are also supportive of dynamic resistance to values associated with carnism, which includes hyper-consumerism, mindless eating, violence towards animals and indifference to both humans and animals caught up in the factory farming system. These discursive strategies serve to bring vegan-curious newcomers into the fold of the vegan CofP as well as motivate vegan regulars to stay active withing the community of practice.

I found a common thread in literature regarding the idea of converting to veganism as making a statement both for the animals and against the consumer mandate of capitalism, with an emphasis on leaving behind the norms of non-vegan perceptions towards animals as commodities. These ideas further lead to a shift in *belief systems* which falls in the realm of religious discourse. I further related testimonials of the ethical conversion to veganism to a metaphorical expressions which embody the concept of "rupture," (Meyer 1998; Robbins 2004; Marshall 2009) or breaking with the past around animal consumption, and separation from

practices, ideas and material realities around the consumption of animal products by "crossing the line," "crossing the bridge," "taking down walls" and "taking the jump" (Interviews, Conversations at Monthly Potlucks, Conversations at Other Events, 2018-2019). Rupture also includes ideas around belief, time, issues of continuity/discontinuity, alterity and otherness (Csordas 2004, 163), and while there is a "presumed interiority of religious experience," a critique based on the concept of rupture modifies the phenomenological understanding of religion as "a majestic and wholly 'Other' with the notion of alterity of the gendered self as *embodied otherness*, as well as the recognition of political alterity as a religious structure. This idea of an embodied otherness is friendly towards placing focus on practices as opposed to individual identities, which is compatible with the CofP approach. Further, the phenomenological approach states *religious dimension of culture must be studied on its own terms* (Tremlett 2014, viii). These conceptual premises benefit this thesis as it seeks to describe ethical veganism in terms of religious discourse around conversion testimonials without "ready-made boundaries" of religion versus secular practices, belief systems, and ideologies. Of all the interview participants, Natalia gave me the clearest picture of how ethical veganism was both like and unlike a religion, especially coming from her religious identity as an agnostic. I found that testimonials like Natalia's which were centered on going vegan "for the animals" also seemed to lead to personalized firmness and *resoluteness* around animal ethics within the vegan CofP. As Natalia stated, conversion to veganism was like changing religions, which also caused her to mourn the way she used to think and see the world (Natalia, Interview 2018). This same resoluteness also seemed to motivate vegan-curious participants on the periphery to spend more time volunteering at events and spending more time with group members. This was the case for Natalia, who began volunteering for the monthly potlucks as soon as she attended her first

monthly potluck.

Further, the practice of storytelling was characterized by participants who related stories about pets and animals they knew from childhood which influenced their *resoluteness* in converting to veganism later in life, such as D'Marco's and Maya's relationships with their pet pigs. Other participants related stories about animals from their recent past which caused them to make choices in life which served as extensions of their veganism. An example is Tanja, whose friendship with a giraffe named Kiva at the Houston Zoo led her to choose a new vocation. She had worked at the Houston Zoo for a number of years yet decided to leave and pursue a more vegan-friendly career dure to the intelligence and sentience she experienced knowing Kiva (Tanja, Interview 2018).

Finally, the practice of political consumerism is really an expression of all the other practices. It ties the other practices to the greater vegan lifestyle movement by creating a "consumer tribe" composed of vegan core and regular members as well as vegan-curious newcomers who are learning strategies for reducing demand for animal-based products in the market. Political consumerism as a bottom-up consumer-driven approach is also a form of activism related to causes such as fighting air, land and water pollution as well as climate change, by reducing consumption of animal products produced in the factory farming industry. Political consumerism is a way of life which ties into vegan identity through a "veganized" and "greener" political economy which manifests in marketing of vegan goods at large events such as VegFest Houston and the Earth Day celebration, as well as the growth of the vegan food truck culture in Houston and all-vegan brick and mortar establishments across Houston. I also provide a critique of the "green economy" related to hyper-consumerism in 5.5 Suggestions and Strategies for VSOP Program Outreach, as well as in my deliverables.

5.4 Vegan Identity

As stated in 4.2.5 Identity Construction through VSOP as a CofP, construction of vegan identity is tied to beliefs which inform practices as well as connect to subcultural identities and the greater vegan lifestyle movement. I also concluded that while identification as "vegan" in the group is preferred, a trend in the greater lifestyle movement has shifted away from "vegan" to "plant-based." This has further implications for dealing with stereotypes associated with veganism, which may also be seen as barriers to veganism. Further, as members of VSOP as a CofP in the context of the greater vegan lifestyle movement, participants embodied discursive strategies in dealing with non-vegan societal norms. Eckert (2006) recognizes that individuals belong to simultaneous and numerous CofP's throughout their lifetimes, which also plays a role in the formation of vegan identities on both the individual and group levels. Similar to the abandonment of "assumptions that gender can be isolated from other aspects of social identity and relations," or that "linguistic manifestations of gender have the same meaning across communities" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 462), the performance of vegan within the context of VSOP as a CofP is a naturally embodied expression of learning veganism around the ongoing conflict between what is expected (normative) and what is real (ontological) for vegans. Moreover, CofP as a theoretical model recognizes that "identity is not fixed or static and convention does not pre-exist use, as language use is a continual process of learning" (Eckert 2006, 3). Often, these embodied responses are utilized in other CofP's to which the participant owes allegiance, such as that of the non-vegan normative workplace, or in the context of everyday experiences, such as at a restaurant which is not particularly vegan-friendly. As an example, and in his embracing of being "that guy," Sal showed me how aspects of being vegan in the group and "doing vegan" in the "real world" can have more than one meaning.

As I performed discourse analysis, I discovered a remarkable similarity in embodiment of vegan identity within the vegan CofP to Bourdieu's ideas around embodiment and identity in the form of the *habitus*, which, for the purposes of this thesis, is the internalization of one's cultural practices, reflected by the mannerisms, gestures, discursive practices, and embodied responses to conflict which are embedded in the political economy of factory farming. According to Bourdieu, the concept of the *habitus*, which consists of "corporal dispositions and cognitive templates," is designed to "capture and encapsulate" the dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity (Bourdieu 1988). As such, I further relate *habitus* to an internally manifested cultural hegemony, as the individual in question is not usually aware of all the comportments, postures and visages which make up his or her own *gestalt*. As well, I formed a connection between ideas of embodied moral experience, subjectivity, and relationality of being which are prominent in phenomenological discourse situated around anthropological views of ethics and morality. This connection is compatible with the approach this thesis takes towards understanding ethical veganism in terms of identity construction within a vegan CofP. As an example, Marty pointed out that vegan identity is a "testing of every second of your day, what you drink, what you eat, what you say, what you watch" (Marty, Interview 2018), which may also have implications for, on the one hand, the impetus to embrace veganism as a challenge or, on the other hand, barriers to veganism and even newcomer attendance at the monthly potlucks. Finally, lovely presentation of vegan foods, especially at the monthly potlucks, is an important part of vegan identity construction within the group and an important part of identity and food aesthetics within the greater vegan lifestyle movement, which aids in community-building and teaching newcomers how to make vegan dishes. This also relates back to normative standards and ideas about core and regular members bringing homemade items as opposed to store-bought vegan foods, yet

there were also many exceptions. As suggested by Leonora, “Let newcomers know it is ok to bring store-brought food to the potlucks” (Leonora, Interview 2018).

5.5 Group Symbolism, Meaning of the Acronym PEACE

As an expression of vegan identity, discourse around group symbolism was a useful way to understand how identity related to participants’ ideas of what VSOP as a community of practice means to its members. In my in-depth semi-structured interviews, I considered ideas around group symbolism which answered the question, “What does VSOP symbolize to you?,” The “group,” referring to VSOP as a symbolic construct of identity, is important to the client, as this gives them insight into how group members perceive their experiences, especially within the context of CofP. Further, I chose excerpts that were most representative of individuals that I encountered in participant observation and other events. This further enhanced a discussion around the need for group cohesion at the level of the potluck and smaller events. The full excerpts may be found in Appendix A of this thesis and may be summarized as follows: VSOP symbolizes a support group, a volunteer opportunity, a family; networking, options, choices; education, fellowship, unity of purpose; an anchor, a long-lost friend, comfort; intelligence, not being alone, the teacher; and hope and integrity.

Figure 5.4: Vegan Society of Peace logo with acronym P.E.A.C.E.

Source: vegansocietyofpeace.org

In consideration of what each of the letters of the acronym "PEACE" (People, Earth, Animals, Compassion, Enlightenment) meant to each participant, Appendix B of this thesis shows the full answers. When asked about the meaning for each of the letters in the acronym PEACE, interview participants gave a variety of answers. Two of the interview participants felt this line of inquiry was too simplistic and an insult to their intelligence. However, most participants seemed to enjoy giving meaning to the five letters of the acronym. This line of inquiry is also important to the client, as it creates further symbolic meaning through discourse which helps VSOP in promoting their message of peace, compassion, and enlightenment through *ahimsa*. As with group symbolism, I chose excerpts which reflect the group as a whole from my participant observation. Finally, in my written report, I relate group symbolism and the meaning of the acronym PEACE to identity construction within VSOP as a CofP. This shows the client VSOP how meaning is often symbolically constructed through discourse around commonly held beliefs which manifest in practices.

5.6 Suggestions and Strategies for VSOP Program Outreach

Included in my deliverables are suggestions for VSOP from interview participants as well as vegan and vegan-curious people I spoke to at several different events. Some of the suggestions were explicit, while others were implied. Suggestions are categorized as follows: potluck event planning, Vegan Thanks-Living event planning, speakers and presenters, volunteer issues at VegFest 2018, VegFest 2019 feedback, VSOP organization, outreach to newcomers, vegetarian and other non-vegan issues, outreach to the elderly, outreach to addiction recovery programs, outreach to religious organizations, and outreach to the Black communities of Houston, especially with regards to structural health issues and lifestyle diseases (see Appendix C). Of particular importance were the following: suggestions for various forms of outreach to specific

populations in Houston (elderly, religious, addiction recovery, Black communities); drawing upon religion and spirituality in potluck gatherings and for speakers, a vegan "walking meditation" (Hope, Interview 2018), and the idea of a "vegan church" (Manuela, Interview 2018); focus on the newcomers and assigning "ambassadors" to make newcomers feel welcome (Sissy, Interview 2018); taking the vegan message to nursing homes (Sissy, Interview 2018); showing that VSOP values diversity in its membership and that vegans are not "arrogant and elite" (Leonora, Interview 2018); nurturing connections with current vegan regulars (Natalia, Interview 2018); vegan cooking workshops, practicing "hand-holding and one-on-one work," and "organizing smaller get-together's at people's homes" (Antoinette, Interview 2018); being accepting of vegetarians who promote vegetarianism first then veganism, and outreach to non-vegans instead of "preaching to the choir" (Sydney, Interview 2018).

Strategies for outreach and growth of the vegan community in Houston are the main focus of my deliverables to the client VSOP. These strategies are based on structural barriers to veganism around privilege, whiteness, race and ethnicity in Greater Houston, with special attention given to "socio-spatial epistemologies of consumption" (Harper 2012, 159). Further, I drew upon Wright's assertion that "while there are many reasons why people choose to become or not to become vegan, there are also socioeconomic and structural hindrances that keep veganism from being a viable option for many others" (Wright 2017, 2). In my findings, I showed that VSOP as a CofP is both *challenging* and *challenged* by the structural barriers of privilege and whiteness associated with veganism, especially with regards to survey participants who reside in primarily more privileged areas of Houston. Furthermore, Greenebaum's (2018, 1) critique that associating veganism with whiteness and privilege is *wrong*, as it both marks and marginalizes people of color within the vegan movement, is a powerful statement.

The importance of Harper's "socio-spatial epistemologies of consumption" is that it provides a methodology which is based on a critical geography of race which looks at race-conscious veganism as a point of departure for dynamic and empowered responses to structural barriers to veganism. The "embodied experiences of the places and spaces we navigate through" (Harper 2012, 156) are also consistent with ideas around identity construction within VSOP as a CofP, as situated learning by newcomers occurs in the spatial context of the monthly potlucks, other events, and across virtual space on the internet and social media.

Personal barriers for participants of cost, transportation, social exclusion, misunderstanding, taste, habit, tradition, and convenience must be understood in terms of structural barriers of access and privilege, as well in the context of the political economy of factory farming. Distances to vegan-friendly markets and restaurants were largely found to correlate to whether the participant resided in one of the more "privileged" areas of Houston, especially to the west and southwest of downtown, or whether the participant resided in rural areas of the Greater Houston area. Data from the Happy Cow App showed that a preponderance of vegan-friendly markets such as Whole Foods as well as all-vegan restaurants are found in the relatively higher income areas in the central and western parts of Houston. However, my findings also showed the importance of food trucks, vegan food delivery operations, vegan caterers, vegan bakeries and farmer's markets to the expansion of the vegan movement to certain low-income, low-access, food insecure and food desert areas of Greater Houston which are found to the north, east and south of downtown, and to the southwest. These areas were shown to correlate with lower median household income, zip codes associated with a higher percentage of families living below the federal poverty level, and indicators of distressed zip codes, which were also found to correspond to a majority Black and Hispanic population (Olin, 5

November.2020). Further, while the majority of survey participants reside in more privileged areas of Houston, a total of 14 out of 50 zip codes where survey participants reside are “at-risk” for having a higher percentage of families living below the poverty level. As well, many of these zip codes have a lower median household income, are associated with food deserts, food insecurity, and distressed zip codes in Houston.

Therefore, the idea that vegan food trucks are also found in these “at-risk” areas of Houston is an opportunity for vegan outreach into neighborhoods where the power to choose what one consumes has been taken from its residents by structural barriers associated with access, privilege, and the pervasive political economy of factory farming, which rests upon the capitalist commodification of animals. As stated in 4.3.9 Structural Barriers: Access and Privilege, and from my observations, the food truck movement in Houston is closely connected to subverting racial and privileged norms around veganism by virtue of many Black and Hispanic-owned food trucks, as well as locations ranging from the Third Ward, an historically Black neighborhood and communities to the East of Downtown (“Eado”), to more suburban areas to the north and southwest of Houston. I believe strategies for growth of the vegan community need to include a race-conscious veganism which also considers geography and socio-spatial epistemologies of consumption. Indeed, VSOP is supportive of these food truck and other vegan start-up businesses, featuring them as vendors at the VegFest Houston events and as speakers and presenters at the February Black History Month monthly potluck (Observations, 2018-2019). I believe further outreach through these food truck operations is a lucrative strategy for growth of the vegan community in Houston, as well as support of catering-based operations, often run by POC and home-vegan chefs (mostly women), as well as bakeries and delivery start-ups, which are showing up in even further outlying areas of Greater Houston. In addressing the

idea of a race-conscious veganism, then, I believe VSOP has already made great strides, especially towards the South Asian communities of Houston, as well as the Black communities. I would recommend further outreach to poorer areas of Houston, and even some charity work, such as creating *ahimsa*-based food altars and tables not unlike the Sicilian St. Joseph's Tables which feed the poor in Los Angeles each Lenten season (Del Giudice 2010); vegan soup kitchens for the homeless; and vegan ambassadors from the group which work with communities and neighborhoods regarding access to fresh and healthy vegan foods through community gardens and local farmer's markets as well as making vegan foods affordable and available for all who seek to join the vegan lifestyle movement in Houston.

In my recommendations, I also address structural barriers to veganism in Houston around hyper-consumerism, commodification of animals, factory farming, and labelling. Vegan political consumerism is one of the main practices within VSOP as a CofP which addresses these barriers, a consumer-driven bottom-up approach to thwarting these complex, elusive and often unseen barriers to veganism. However, producers and production of animal-based products is a cultural process as well, and it is helpful to understand supply-side motivations as well as hegemonic belief systems which often remain undetected by citizen consumers. These belief systems fuel hyper-consumerism of animal-based products, which also contributes to barriers associated with convenience and structural barriers associated with the marketing of fast food to low-income, low-access, nutritionally deprived areas of Houston. In this respect, the vegan message is needed the most in these communities to offset these difficult challenges to low-income areas of Houston. It is also important to address hyper-consumerism as a critique of political consumerism and the "green economy," in order to create a balanced view of these modes of demand-side responses to structural dynamics. In other words, political consumers also run the

risk of mindless eating and mindless consumption of plant-based processed foods, especially in the context of "junk-food veganism," which is the opposite of a healthier whole-foods plant-based (WFPB) lifestyle. Further, VSOP benefits from the promotion of a mindful political consumerism focused on consuming less overall, extending the vegan lifestyle to other areas of life (taking the bike instead of driving in urban areas), and engaging in race-conscious veganism, especially with regards to finding healthy affordable alternatives to the fast-food industry norms found in lower-income areas of Houston.

Another facet of structural barriers to veganism in Houston revolves around the capitalist commodification of animals, especially with regards to factory farming of egg-laying hens and dairy cows. For vegan-curious survey participants, especially vegetarians, I found that the biggest obstacle to going vegan was giving up dairy and eggs (51.1%). One way which VSOP addresses this barrier is through advertising and print media around the humane myth, which states that while advertisers promote and label eggs, dairy and meat as "humanely-raised," "pasture-raised," "grass-fed," "cage-free," and the like, vegan counter-myths reveal the truth.

Myth in the anthropology of religion may be described as a sacred story which matters to the people who hold it to be true in their world view, as opposed to the understanding of myth as untrue or "not real." For the purposes of this thesis, myth is a story that may or may not be true, yet to the teller it often *needs to be true* to fit into certain belief systems. As well, understanding myth in terms of sacred story allows for shifting perceptions, especially around the commodification of animals. It is also important to note that the humane myth *needs to be true* for corporate producers who are focused on profit margins. As an aside, myths as worldview in this respect hold true for both carnists *and* vegans (in the form of counter-myth). This realization is important for the client VSOP and may be useful in strategies for exposing truths about factory

farming and capitalist commodification of animals which appeals to vegan-curious newcomers.

Finally, ideas around alienation from one's food and food source, disconnection from animals raised for food, and notions of speciesism were pervasive throughout participant observation, literature review, and interviews. I found that alienation from one's food in this respect is also a major factor in hyper-consumerism and mindless eating. Newcomers to VSOP found connection to their food through awareness of "the truth behind factory farms," which were shown in videos, documentaries, podcasts, radio shows, and social media. Awareness and connection also manifested in volunteer days and rallies at animal sanctuaries and rescues like Rowdy Girl Sanctuary and the Chicken Rescue, and through speakers and presenters from animal rescues, like the Mini-Pig Rescue. Castree's ideas of alienability, referring to the "capacity of a given commodity, and specific classes of commodities, to be physically and morally separated from their sellers" (Castree 2003, 279), as well as Carol Adams' idea of the "absent referent" (Adams 2015), are useful resources for further understanding alienation from one's food in the context of a political economy of factory farming, as well as confronting ideologies associated with carnism and cognitive dissonance. Recommendations to the client VSOP include providing more opportunities to connect with animals rescued from factory farms through "volunteer days" at animal rescues and sanctuaries, which proved to be meaningful and memorable for participants including myself. As well, I found that religious beliefs, ideas, and traditions associated with *ahimsa*, enlightenment, and The Golden Rule led to feelings of kinship with animals and nature, which also aids in bringing in vegan-curious newcomers to VSOP.

5.7 Reflections and Moving Forward

As I reflect upon findings, analysis, discussion and deliverables to the client VSOP, I am drawn again to the idea of *rupture*, or breaking from the past. This idea is often linked to

revolution and religious ideologies, as in Sylvestre's (2009, 6) reference to Dylan Clark's punk vegans (2004), which states that by resisting commodification and capitalism, veganism becomes a "symbol and tool of resistance within a religious ideology" which "strengthens resolve and cohesion of the group" (Sylvestre 2009, 16). In creating, building, and maintaining a vegan community of practice in Houston, vegan-curious newcomers and vegan regulars can draw upon the idea of rupture as a breaking of non-vegan traditions, belief systems and habits which are seen to promote suffering of animals in factory farms, labs, and cages; harms to people through lifestyle diseases as well as poor conditions for (often immigrant) workers in factory farms; and a threat to the environment through air, land and water pollution which contribute to climate change and loss of biodiversity.

In my field experience, I witnessed an individual and collective rupture occurring through vegan-curious conversion to veganism, a new way of life involving the "elaboration of new modes of government of the self and of others, in which practices of faith are fostered by specific disciplines of the body and the mind, emphasizing purity, rectitude, righteousness, and interiority" (Marshall 2009, 3). These practices of faith were focused on a higher purpose, not constrained by religion, but enhanced by religious beliefs and narratives such as biblical exegesis of Genesis 1:26-29, which challenges the idea that humanity has dominion over animals (in order to consume them) by pointing to the gift of seed-bearing plants and fruit trees, which vegans consider the healthier choice in maintaining the body as temple. Practices of faith also focused on the moral imperative of *ahimsa* which served to reiterate why ethical vegans in VSOP as a CofP so passionately connect with their practices. Moreover, a religious conviction towards veganism manifested in suggestions and euphemisms by participants ("the Green Church") which further expanded my understanding of the relationship of rupture in the context of ethical

veganism to the breaking of non-vegan traditions, even around religious upbringing. As Manuela stated, “Religious leaders must include animals in the Golden Rule, lest they be considered hypocrites (Manuela, Interview 2018).

Further, conversion to veganism is in line with revolution, power and struggle, as well as the rupture of both time and belief, as Robbins critiqued in the form of “continuity thinking” within the anthropology of Christianity (Robbins 2004; 2007). To be “born-again” as a vegan is a breaking with the past, a separation from practices, ideas, material realities, and old ways of thinking and believing (Robbins 2004, 2006). Rupture is also a breaking *towards the future*, where “conversion is like revolution, in that both are, at least in their fuller forms, processes of change undertaken in light of a story about how such change can work” (Robbins 2019, 218).

An idea which permeates vegan popular culture and media is the idea of the “vegan revolution” (Observations, 2018-2019), which is also related to vegan identity construction. In a recent article from VegWorld Magazine, a publication found at the check-in table of the monthly potlucks as well as the larger vegan events, veganism is referred to as a cultural shift originating in “younger generations who place animal welfare, personal health, and the climate crisis at the forefront of their consumer choices” (Ede, 3 April.2021). I found this to be a misnomer, as my findings showed that *all age generations* are beginning to embrace this cultural shift around veganism. As D’Marco stated, “going vegan is revolutionary” (D’Marco, Interview 2018). I also found that most participants in the group were similar to animal advocates, who possess a “deeply spiritual commitment to justice for the oppressed and a general revulsion toward violence against sentient beings” (Jamison et al. 2000, 306). Their beliefs around the moral imperative of *ahimsa* as well as some participants’ ties to Christian beliefs around the religious and spiritual origins of veganism in the Bible serve to reiterate why ethical vegans in VSOP as a

CofP so passionately connect with their practices.

In connecting rupture to the mainstream "vegan revolution," the literature review, findings, analysis, and discussion have uncovered a further moral imperative: Race-conscious veganism must be included as part of this revolution, a rupture of traditions which associate veganism with whiteness and privilege, thus marginalizing POC vegans. Rupture must include breaking barriers of access to healthy whole foods which happen to be vegan, confronting food insecurity in distressed zip codes of Houston, and breaking habits associated with mindless eating and hyper-consumerism. In the greater vegan lifestyle movement, food trucks, local farmer's markets, and urban gardens are a way to create a rupture in the current geographical manifestation of all-vegan restaurants and whole foods markets located in only the more privileged areas of Houston and gentrified neighborhoods. Ideas of alienation, alterity and otherness within the political economy of factory farming must consider human rights as well as animal rights, racism as well as speciesism.

In reflecting upon my deliverables to the client VSOP, I believe the holism of the anthropological perspective was helpful in the enrichment of understanding differences between personal and structural barriers. I also understood limitations to my recommendations regarding structural barriers around economically distressed areas of Houston, which VSOP likely cannot fully counteract those as those are much larger problems. However, recommendations such as sending vegan ambassadors to help mitigate within certain communities may prove to be useful to the client VSOP. As anthropology looks at emic (insider) perspectives from all sides, I also venture to suggest that VSOP re-evaluate the framing of messaging to non-vegans and other aspects of outreach, such as where they advertise with respect to a more race-conscious veganism.

In moving forward, I am interested in future ethnography around race, ethnicity and multispecies concerns, especially in the context of ideas from the anthropology of food and the anthropology of Christianity. Broadening the lens, I plan to take a philosophical approach to advocacy for animals in factory farming, with the hopes of contributing to literature which promotes sustainable alternatives. Finally, in my own personal journey as a vegan-curious participant, I hope to continue to attend VSOP events as the world opens again, with great optimism for the vegan message of *ahimsa*. As I continue to engage on a daily basis with sentient farm creatures, I am amazed at their intelligence and emotional lives. They are my inspiration to support animal sanctuaries, rescues and rehabs, including my own.

APPENDIX A

MEANINGS FOR PARTICIPANTS: GROUP SYMBOLISM

Gaia and D'Marco likened VSOP to a support group, a volunteer opportunity and family.

Hope found VSOP to symbolize inspiration and networking.

Jasper stated that the acronym PEACE says it all: "But primarily, it symbolizes education about the potential of lifestyle change, and just how beneficial it can be." Therefore, it symbolizes options, choice, and a variety of vegan foods which proves to be quite informative.

Yogita sees VSOP as a "beautiful community" from whom and with she can find inspiration.

For Sal, it was about the fact that they were "trying to educate people about what they do."

For Spargle, VSOP symbolizes fellowship with other vegans, an opportunity to hear speakers, and meet some of the people that have such a passion for animals.

Bobo believes VSOP symbolizes unity of purpose, "that there are a growing number of people who are realizing the benefits to the world of a vegan lifestyle," or "social influence which makes your decision [to go vegan] easier."

For Manuela, VSOP is like an anchor "that she can go and feel support in what my spiritual values are'.

For Maya, the group means strength in numbers around education on intersectional social justice issues.

For Tatum, the group felt like a family, "warm and welcoming and inviting," which means a lot to her, as she did not grow up with a close family.

For Thelma Louise, VSOP symbolizes "a group of people who are concerned about conscious living and people who are promoting healthier lifestyles."

Firion suggested VSOP as “an opportunity for people to see that there are other vegans, and to also if you're new to veganism or if you want to share veganism with people who are interested or are available in your life who don't know about it, it's an opportunity to present that to them. Trying the food, seeing other people, hearing other people's perspectives on it as well as the speakers for presentations.”

For Marty, the group is like finding a long-lost friend: And, then you get to talk about all these things that feel like it's so bottled up and you're able to just be your authentic self.”

For Rachael, it is comfort: “It’s just fun to hang out with them.”

For Hortense, symbolism relates to intellectual ability of vegans: “Community and confirmation that other people are on the same path and there are very, very smart reasons to be on this path. We love the smart people. We love the other very smart people who are doing this. They've done it longer. They're so happy to share their advice.”

For Dina, the group symbolizes that she is not alone in her vegan journey. She did not know there were “that many vegans in Houston,” and it was lovely to know that other families “are dealing with the same things you are going through [as a newcomer]; people willing to help you, answer questions, guide you […] you can turn to someone besides the internet to talk to.”

Tanja stated the group symbolized “the passion and altruism of the teacher,” the “intersectionality of the environment, animal rights, and women’s rights,” representing “caring, inspirational, aspirational goals and a willingness and a desire to actively live as an example, to have their lives to be no interference with their values and to be an example for others. To sum it up in one word, it's leadership.”

For Rory and Valentina, VSOP symbolizes community and love, peace, harmony, “they do what they stand for.”

Finally, Veva sees VSOP as "hope for the world," a chance for animals to live like they are supposed to, a chance for vegan-curious non-vegans to "take down their walls on veganism."

APPENDIX B

MEANINGS FOR PARTICIPANTS: THE ACRONYM P.E.A.C.E.

P for People

Because peace and positive energy creates innovation, we are the people, so we should be at peace. Resisting violence against one another and animals (Gaia and D'Marco).

P stands for People: Care for fellow human beings and future generations, resisting the unethical consumerist society (Yogita).

Being a "people person," Bobo stated people are everything.

Tatum does not like people.

People is "just all of humanity" (Sissy).

People is "putting forth our human privilege and exercising empathy, compassion, and responsibility, eliminating of animals and humans, including the humans employed by carnism" (Firion).

"So, people, community, the humans that surround us, everyone who lives at Rice, in Houston, on the earth" (Jory).

"Well, people, we're all connected to each other, so we're all each other's keeper" (Hortense).

"The people are just Americans, not just Americans, but international people" (Yan-yan).

"People are just a subset of animals" (Dmitri).

"People means community" (Tanja).

People: "I would like to think that would be all of us uniting to understand that veganism is correct, and that we're not being selfish as vegans, animals are priority." But when people are there, it's mainly animals, but it's animals and people, for their health too. And the environment, and the starving. It's more than what they look at through their little lens, and they judge us (Veva).

Thelma Louise stated: “P means caring and being concerned about your fellow human beings wanting harmony with the Earth and wanting there to not be fighting or war between people, just calmness on Earth.”

E for Earth

Earth means being responsible and mindful of what you are consuming as it all relates back to the earth, which is our home: “This is the one spot, that we have and for me being vegan, it's like I'm more in tune with the earth. You know? So, take care of the planet, the planet takes care of you (Gaia and D’Marco).

Yogita stated “E stands for Earth, and I believe in keeping the Earth happy, healthy, the way we got it. Again, for the future generations. Our generation may not even face the consequences that we are afraid of, but I understand, and I see the negative impacts of climate change, of people's choices impacting Earth. And I want to stop that.”

“Earth is the massive organism that we are a part of. And I just don't think we should be strip mining or injecting chemicals into it, that kind of thing” (Bobo).

“Earth, I just think of both beauty and falling apart. Beautiful and I love the national parks and the sights and the nature, but then seeing it all, people not care about and seeing the cities being built over it is like, I think of destruction” (Tatum).

“Earth encompasses not just the planet in terms of the big view from a far perspective, but a close view in terms of soil, and water, and all the elements that make up the earth's surface and internal life. And I see that this is a living planet, it is a living organism” (Sissy).

“And for the Earth, seeing the whole planet as important. Seeing ourselves as a small but influential part, and accepting our responsibility to manage only ourselves, our actions, and our

behaviors, and not treat others, especially other animals, as resources to be exploited for our gain, for our taste, for our amusement, et cetera" (Firion).

"The earth. For me, again, since I'm a big environmentalist, I immediately go to that, and what is climate change doing to this earth, this planet that we live on? It's huge. It's enormous. It's amazing, but it works on time scales much longer than the human life" (Jory).

"Earth, everything we put in our mouth is related to the earth's sustainability" (Hortense).

"Earth means that you've got to take care of the earth because you live on it" (Yan-yan).

"Earth means environment" (Tanja).

"The Earth, with climate change, there's the deforestation, there's the palm oil, with the orangutans, that really bothers me too. There's all kinds of things with the earth, it's gonna just vanish. The methane with the cows, and the runoff, it never ends" (Veva).

"The E for Earth means being concerned about air, water, land, and concern about the place where we live and where we can go and how we can grow our food and how we can enjoy the land" (Thelma Louise).

A for Animals

"Their voices" (Gaia and D'Marco).

Jasper sees animals as "incredible products of evolution," just as he sees humans.

Yogita stated: "A stands for animals, and that's the biggest motivation behind me deciding to go vegan is to stop the violence and cruelty towards animals, just for human satisfaction."

"Animals for me have always been a part of my life. I currently foster seven dogs. I've rescued over 70 this year alone. 25% of our work is free work for animal organizations. So,

animals mean a whole lot to me" (Bobo).

"Animals, they're my favorite. I think of love, and when I see animals, I would do anything for them" (Tatum).

Thelma Louise sees animals as beautiful creatures: "A for animals means appreciating creatures that are different from us and not wanting to put any harm on them by continuing with the meat industry and the dairy industry that we currently have in place."

Sissy sees animals as "big, small critters, reptiles, my favorite Texas Toad, all of that."

"Animals, committing to spare animals the indignity and atrocity of being forced into slavery, rape, torture, and murder for our selfish desires, taste. Respecting basic rights/liberties of animals to live and to not be deprived of their livelihoods" (Firion).

Jory thinks of nonhuman animals, such as cats, dogs, deer and bears; he often thinks of the word wildlife: "So, actually when I say animals, my first thought is not livestock. That comes a little bit after domesticated, house animals, and then kind of wild animals that I see while I'm hiking. Even in my mind."

Hortense stated: "Animals are sentient beings. We shouldn't be cruel to them. That's hideous."

The animals, meaning they are aware, conscious, and can feel pain (Yan-yan).

Tanja sees animals as sentient beings, intelligent, loving, and their existence does not need to be validated by anyone: "I feel like if I recognize and see the sentience in another being that it's undeniable to me that, that being has worth."

For Rory and Valentina, animals are the same as us; they are beings; they are alive; they deserve to be here as much as we do. They are our neighbors and our friends.

For Veva, animals are the priority, "they're the absolute purest souls. They can do no

wrong […] When I see them, I think mercy and grace. I think how much, we owe them apology after apology. It's not only words but actions. For the rest of our lives, and we still won't even be able to equal the point of how good they are to us. I'm in awe of that, I always have been in awe of that."

C for Compassion

Compassion means thinking about more than yourself (Gaia and D'Marco).

C stands for compassion, and "just like being compassionate to my loved ones, I want to be compassionate to all other sentient human beings, or sentient living things. So, any living being that can feel pain, I do not wish to evoke harm upon" (Yogita).

Bobo believes compassion is a way of life, not a moral choice.

"I would say that it is choosing to be compassionate towards another living being. It's making the choice to be a bigger person, like I said earlier. Just because we can doesn't mean we have to" (Tatum).

For Sissy, compassion means empathy and being actively helpful.

Compassion, understanding that actions speak louder than words, and our commitment to avoid eating, wearing, owning, and "using and abusing" animals is of higher value than any argument which could be fabricated to deny responsibility while still taking part in these crimes (Firion).

Compassion? I think of empathy. I think of good listening. I think of hugs. Being there for others. Supporting others, could be other people, other animals. Although, I tend to think of it as people; and having conversations and showing people love (Jory).

Marty believes compassion starts in the kitchen. It is a virtue, "the answer to everything."

Hortense believes we all need to be compassionate with ourselves and with each other, because we are all connected, which leads to enlightenment.

Dmitri does not like the word compassion, as it implies that an act of charity is being requested; it is a matter of ethics.

Tanja believes compassion must be applied inward to self-love first, “being willing to take care of your own self so that you can take care of others. If you are always judgmental about yourself and you don't treat yourself well, then you can't really be there for other people.”

For Thelma Louise, compassion means having empathy for other people, having concern for how other people feel and taking other people's emotions and feelings into account.

E for Enlightenment

For Gaia and D’Marco, enlightenment is being more in tune with the universe.

Hope believes enlightenment is awareness of what we're doing to our planet, and awareness of what we do to the animals.

E is enlightenment. And just like I was enlightened through the last couple of months when I came across veganism, as I started to learn more about it by talking to people, reading more about it, I got enlightened, and I want to spread it across so that every human being around me is aware of it and acts consciously in the way that PEACE for us stands for (Yogita).

Leonora believes enlightenment refers to knowledge about the animals.

Bobo believes enlightenment is evolution, “continuing to look to see, is there something else?.”

For Tatum, enlightenment means being a bigger, better person, choosing not to consume animal products, “having the capacity of your mind to realize that these things are wrong, and

not do them because they're wrong."

Sissy believes enlightenment can be spiritual, but it does not have to be: "enlightenment can be a purely cognitive thing where just brain power of knowing a lot, having a lot of information and knowledge versus enlightenment of feeling a spirit outside of myself whether I want to call it God or anything that's not earth bound."

Jory thinks of achieving an otherworldly plane of existence: "You've learned everything you can learn on earth. You have kind of separated yourself from the earth, and you've achieved kind of state of nirvana or all knowing. a very kind of spiritual awakening. I also think of it as a light bulb moment. You can have little moments of enlightenment."

Yan-yan believes enlightenment stands for seeing the truth.

"Enlightenment is a process of letting go. I believe that enlightenment has to do with a recognition that we live in a state of ignorance and we have to move towards acceptance. It's a willingness to say I no longer wish to suffer. My suffering is due to my attachments and my ignorance and I'm willing to follow a path that will help to support the journey toward wisdom and helping others achieve their enlightenment too" (Tanja).

Manuela believes that to achieve enlightenment "you have to get over the anger. First, stop eating animals. Stop eating their terror and anger. There's a lot of angry vegans."

The E for enlightenment to me means "being conscious and recognizing how we have power to change the world and to make it a better place" (Natalia).

Maya believes compassion brings enlightenment.

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT SUGGESTIONS FOR VSOP

Religion and Spirituality

Include a prayer before the potluck meal, for awareness of "all the hands that made the food, all the plants that grew the food, the sun and everything else, every grain of rice" (Hope).

Consider adding Father Sky and Mother Earth to the prayer. Solicit suggestions for prayers and vary the prayer each time to represent all the different faiths belief systems and ethical stances.

Consider a spiritual leader or guru to speak at the potlucks, "someone into mysticism and meditation" (Manuela).

Offer a vegan meditation hour during the week, including a walking meditation (Hope).

Reach out to pastors, priests, etc. Do outreach aimed at churches, temples, etc. Ask one of your own, Reverend Saido, to speak.

Reach out to Joel Osteen and other megachurches (Sydney).

Consider creating a vegan church service on Saturdays with a ceremony (Manuela).

Form the Vegan Church, while addressing the topic of religious vegans, and why are people so afraid of religion. Consider spiritual, not religious in the traditional sense.

Explore Judaism and veganism.

Reach out to the Jain Society and the Hare Krishnas for collaboration (Sydney).

Potluck Event Planning

Vary the routine. Have a table talk meet and greet where the participants sit and eat with their table first, then suggest moving tables to speak to someone new. Have a vegan games night (Cory).

Ask the group; consider a panel presentation (Sissy).

Don’t resist professionalism (Sissy).

Assign ambassadors “to find people in the group that haven't been there before and sit with them. Even if, and explain to people we liked the shared stories, and meet people here and would you mind if I sit with you” (Sissy).

Assume that anybody who comes in the door may have more experience being a vegan than they do: “They don't know. When they do programs that are too simplistic, or too elementary that's going to be a challenge” (Sissy).

Make sure there is enough food at the potlucks… I noticed people that arrived late did not have enough food left and were eating later at the WF after-party.

Focus on the participants, “giving them an opportunity to have a platform and introduce themselves and say a little something about themselves. How long have you been vegan? Make sure people meet one another” (Natalia).

Acknowledge individuals and make them feel like they are a part of something bigger:

“Make them feel loved and part of the group. It does not mean everybody needs to stand up and give a five - minute speech, but just an opportunity to be inclusive. Quick, how long have you been vegan? What is your name? What is your favorite vegan food?” (Natalia).

Work on choice of interesting videos to show at the beginning: “I was not so impressed by the Rawvana video of mushroom meat, but the ‘Dairy Industry’ and ‘Egg Industry’ were effective. Vegan Mother’s Day gift ideas, people were leaving the room” (Sissy).

Assess low attendance: At the October 2018 potluck, there was a lower attendance, with fewer newcomers, not enough food and less robust dishes, and people were wanting for food and conversation. “It felt like people did not really know what to bring or really understand the meaning of vegan food” (Jasper).

Have a vegan “Desi Night” for South Asian participants focusing on all the dairy alternatives.

Begin with testimonials, then bring in a speaker. “Too much time is passing from eating to speaker time. Have the speaker begin shortly after food is served” (Sydney).

Testimonials

Continue the testimonials by individuals: “I think story telling's great, having people tell their story about why they became vegan. They could even do that from the audience, without them having to come up to the podium” (Sissy).

Speakers and Presenters

Bring back the Mini-Pig speaker, Kim’s “Compassion Fatigue” presentation, and Tiffany from the Chicken Rescue.

Fully vet the speakers. Make sure the presenters are organized and stay on topic, as well as implement coaching for some speakers (Sissy).

Vegan Thanks-Living

Feature a speaker for Thanks-Living that has turkeys or runs a sanctuary with turkeys. Share some uplifting stories about rescued turkeys. Offer vegan Thanks-Living recipe share time. Make the space sacred with candles and low lighting – with a prayer before the meal to celebrate the new way of celebrating Thanks-Living. Keep in mind that some are offended by the faux meat vendor as it reminds them too much of real meat. Keep the focus on the horn of plenty and veggies (Sissy).

Storytime for children maybe focus on a story that does not paint vegans as radical activists but “peace-loving hippies.”

Outreach to the elderly

Educate older people about veganism, taking the message to nursing homes: “There's a huge gap there. First of all, most older people don't want to eat as much meat. They don't digest it well and they begin to realize that they do better without it, and not eating so much of it. I think they eat less meat and more vegetables, more fruits. And they're being told to do that by some responsible doctor. That I think is a missed opportunity” (Sissy).

Newcomers

Show people that vegans are not arrogant and elite, as with the Chick Fil-A incident:

A regular at the monthly potlucks said, ‘Oh, I would never go to Chick-Fil-A, I would never go’, after a newcomer shared that she liked the salads at Chick-Fil-A, Leonora noticed that “the lady, I saw her reaction, she felt like guilty. You know, like she was explaining herself, why she went. I thought that it shouldn't be like that. That's how you can start hating somebody that is vegan, you know?” (Leonora).

Let newcomers know it is ok to bring store-bought food.

VSOP Organization

Collaborate with animal protection organizations.

Be inclusive of other vegan groups.

Show that VSOP is diverse: “The more that Vegan Society of PEACE gets out there, it shows we are not all a cookie cutter replica of our every vegan in this group, that people are very

different and, have different interests and, different ways of life, but at the same time they all share commonality of veganism, and that is a cool thing. I think that will bring in more people. There are a lot of people curious from different ethnicities and, backgrounds, it was really fascinating" (Natalia).

Update the website: "They need to make some adjustments. They need to update it and, make it a little more catching" (Natalia).

Nurture connections with current vegans: "I do think that there needs to be community and there needs to be outreach. There is so much outreach for converting people to veganism and then once they are it is like, 'Okay. Well, then where does that leave you?' And I think there needs to be more community of like - minded vegans associating with one another and, supporting one another and, inspiring one another" (Natalia).

Bring in Vegan Cooking Workshops: "You just need to bring somebody in who has good knife cutting skills, to show people how to cut their fruits and vegetables. That is basically, 75% of what you do in the kitchen when you make vegan food from scratch. Oh, and learn to soak and cook some grains and beans" (Natalia).

Beware of cliquishness, as "young people are turned off by that" (Sydney).

Be open to criticism (Sydney).

Practice some hand-holding and one-on-one work: "I just need somebody that is a vegan that will walk me through the stage I am now to transition to vegan. I'm looking for a support group that can walk me through having that lifestyle other people do. Although the information they gave was good, but it wasn't what I was looking for (Antoinette).

Organize smaller get-togethers at people's homes, "vegan tasting parties": "I'm looking for, let's say somebody says, 'Okay we're gonna have a vegan party. Everybody comes over and

we're gonna cook'. So that you learn how to cook these different recipes" (Antoinette).

Vegetarians and Other Non-Vegans

Be accepting of vegetarians who wish to promote vegetarianism first: "Let them get used to it, and welcome the vegetarians, and then, let the veganism be their choice. If you get too preachy and push it, then people will tend to move away" (Sydney).

Be welcoming to reducitarians; speak to them directly about the importance of what they are doing. Let them know it is not easy to go fully vegan right away (Sydney).

Reach out to non-vegans: "Preaching to the choir won't grow the outreach" (Sydney).

VegFest 2019

Plan for a bigger venue space for the next VegFest. Plan for air-conditioned space and better line and crowd control, better organization of vendors and booths. Long lines at certain vendors made it difficult to move through the crowds at times, inciting fear of crowd panic. My own observations were that it was difficult to fully enjoy the event because of crowding; as well, air conditioning is really important in July in Houston. The volunteer I saw doing line control later in the day looked sweaty and stressed to the gills (Sal). Many of the volunteers looked stressed - make VegFest enjoyable for everyone.

If Minute Maid Park is chosen as the venue again, raise the money to have the VegFest on the baseball field with the retractable roof closed. Most of the park was off-limits.

The concourses were open, instead large fans blew hot air around. Food trucks were located outside, but it was so hot they did not seem too appealing, though many stood in line in the 100-degree heat and humidity. Bring the food trucks to the air-conditioned baseball field.

Addiction Recovery Outreach

Go to drug and alcohol rehabs: Address damaged bodies and healing through veganism and use veganism as a tool for recovering addicts and alcoholics (Antoinette).

Outreach to Black communities in Houston

Assign ambassadors to go into Black communities in Houston to spread the message of veganism, especially with regards to structural health issues and lifestyle diseases (Gaia and D'Marco).

APPENDIX D

RECOMMENDATIONS: STRATEGIES FOR OUTREACH AND GROWTH OF THE VEGAN COMMUNITY IN GREATER HOUSTON

Second Saturdays Monthly Potlucks

Assign “table ambassadors” (vegan regulars) to sit with newcomers during the potluck to make them feel more welcome, especially those who are sitting alone.

Set aside more time for vegan regulars and newcomers to stand and give a brief testimonial of their conversion to veganism before the speaker presentation.

Explore ideas around bringing in religious or spiritual leaders from various faiths as presenters, tying into ideas around *ahimsa*, the Golden Rule, and kinship with all animals.

Consider a panel presentation at one of the monthly potlucks similar to the panel presentations at VegFest Houston with question-and-answer sessions afterwards for newcomers.

Bring in more speakers from animal sanctuaries and rescues, increasing awareness of what these organizations do for the animals and how this is important to veganism. Provide more volunteer opportunities for newcomers and regulars to spend time with the animals, such as weekends at the Chicken Rescue, the Mini-Pig Rescue, and Rowdy Girl Sanctuary.

VegFest Houston

Be aware of hyper-consumerist tendencies and promotion of “junk food veganism” – include more vendors who are promoting a whole foods plant-based (WFPB) approach to veganism and frame vegan consumption as mindful. Vegan sweets are a great way to bring in newcomers but bring in the message of sweets as treats not mainstays of veganism.

Outreach Campaigns

Elderly

Consider reaching out to nursing homes, senior care centers and senior living

communities to promote the health benefits of veganism specific to older age groups and the mental and emotional benefits of living compassionately with *ahimsa* towards animals.

Religious/Spiritual

Play with the idea of a "Green Church" service, a non-denominational space made place for including prayer and values associated with *ahimsa* for both newcomers and regulars to meet, socialize and discuss the rich connection od spirituality and veganism.

Collaborate with leaders from churches, temples, mosques and other places of worship in spreading the message of veganism, such as the Jain Society of Houston and ISKON (Hare Krishna)

Expand outreach to churches and mega-churches in greater Houston

Addiction Recovery

Take the message of veganism to local substance abuse treatment and recovery centers, outpatient groups and 12-step programs, emphasizing the health benefits of veganism for nourishing bodies on the mend from alcohol and drug abuse, as well as the mental and emotional benefits of embracing a greater cause for the animals.

Black and LatinX communities

Assign "vegan ambassadors" to historically Black and LatinX communities to increase awareness of the health benefits of veganism as well as the message of "race-conscious" veganism, showing that veganism is confronting structural and lifestyle diseases, as well as promoting a renewed kinship with the earth and animals

Promote urban community gardens in these neighborhoods, especially through school programs, tying in the connections to healing bodies and communities through veganism and *ahimsa.*

Promote farmer's markets in these neighborhoods, connecting urban and rural areas of Houston and increasing awareness of where food comes from.

Continue and increase outreach through vegan food trucks and other vegan startups: catering-based operations, often run by POC and home-vegan chefs (mostly women), as well as bakeries and delivery start-ups.

Address low-income and low-access areas of Houston through campaigns and social media awareness of food deserts and neighborhood gentrification which excludes POC vegans.

Food-Insecure Communities and Homeless Populations

Show that veganism can be available for *all in Greater Houston.* Call for regulars and newcomers to engage in charity work. Create "*Ahimsa* tables" for the homeless, providing free vegan foods which nourish the body and bring hope to the soul through the compassion and enlightenment associated with *ahimsa*.

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